

◈NTOLOGICA

ONTOLOGICA

A Journal of Art and Thought

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Jarrid Deaton

Kicking and Elbowing for Art: Creative Culture Needs to Change in Eastern Kentucky

These mountains have to change.

I don't mean in the physical sense, although it is often touted as a solution by those who support mountain top removal, but the very culture itself has to evolve in order for eastern Kentucky to emerge from the shadowed areas of anti-progression.

This resistance, a kind of stuck-in-the-creek mindset, comes from the area's past, with children taking what they were told by their parents as law with no room for modification. They have been taught to value the sweat of the brow over the toil of the mind at all costs. For them, the only book to read is the Bible. The television, with its constant white noise, is safe, much like a radio tuned to a non-threatening station. I've seen this resistance. The maddening part of the whole thing is the fact that this resistance came, not from people who think they have no use for the arts, but from those who are writers.

In 2004, I came to the local college near my home for what was advertised as a "Coffeehouse Reading." The reading was sponsored by the English department, with a pretty forward-thinking young woman as its steward. Most of the people who read before me were students. I read an early story of mine that included a fairly graphic scene, but I didn't think it would be a big deal. I was wrong. One of the people who had read a poem, a faculty member, got up with his wife and made a big show of leaving the room and not returning. Later, I found out that the forward-thinking woman, a writer herself, e-mailed the entire college

campus to apologize to those who may have been offended by what I had read.

I contacted the faculty member and voiced my opinion on the matter, and she replied by saying that I should have considered my audience. If college faculty and students gathered for a fiction and poetry reading can't accept something that is different than the "I lived my life up a holler and it was great" memoirs, then what would the proper audience be? The faculty member, who I have dealt with a few more times since the incident, cares deeply about her students and promoting creative writing, but I think that her hands are tied by the ones in control of the college who think that any literature coming out of eastern Kentucky should portray the region in a nostalgic or positive light and that any other view would be detrimental to advancing the public perspective of life in the hills and mountains of Appalachia. I happen to think it's the exact opposite, and truth should be paramount, but the battle is hard. This negation of truth by a large portion of the populace in eastern Kentucky also reaches into the news media, a profession where I have spent almost ten years of my working life. As a journalist, I have heard the common complaint that newspapers only print bad things. This is a common view held all across the nation, but the eastern Kentucky version is a little different. The plea for positive news escalated to a point where a local hospital founded its own newspaper that only prints "good news" and refuses to tackle any subject that could cause any trouble or raise the ire of any readers. In one aspect, it would seem that the Holy Glow and Status Quo brigade came away with a serious victory on the news media side of things, and they don't want to stop there.

This communal cry for good news and points of view even reached the opinion section of some newspapers. A few columnists that I know who write for local papers have addressed certain problems using satire, and it is immediately viewed as an attack on the people of the area instead of a witty way of putting a the issue at hand under the spotlight.

Letters and phone calls come in a daily basis from people who want to see more things written about the past, about how things were more simple and hardworking mountain folk helped each other out and never developed a sense of cynicism. In this way, news and art are looked at and opposed in the same fashion by a large percentage of people in the Big Sandy region of Kentucky.

Here is where things shift a bit and head in a direction that may be a bit unexpected. Yes, this region appears to be resistant to the arts that they do not understand, or are suspect of, but there are many people, a surprising number, who live in this area that are actively searching out writing and other art forms. These are the people who bought copies of Cellar Door, the magazine where I was co-founder. These people passed it around among friends. These people started showing up at readings with encouraging words and saying they were excited about what we were doing. However, the number of those who resist any art that poses a threat to their "normal" existence is far greater than the group who issued their support to us. In fact, for the first issue of the magazine, the printing press that agreed to print Cellar Door for a rather steep price called me on the day that i was supposed to pick up the finished product and told me that they would not be able to do it, citing "subject matter" as the reason why the were declining our business after cashing the check. Of course, they refunded the money, but the denial set the debut issue back another month while we searched for a new printer.

Yes, the magazine offended people, but it also brought in support from those who were actively seeking an alternative to the stifling negative parts of southern culture that is so ingrained in this area. It brought the problem out in the open, but it wasn't a solution in its own right. In order to combat this issue, I think the only real way to go about it is to abandon the common ties of southern writing and embrace the reality. Sure, plenty of writers show the

poor, the dirty, the drunks, the druggies, all of those hardscrabble lives, but all of these works are quickly shuffled to their own section and read by the same agents of change who write these books. This kind of circular semi-solution accomplishes nothing in the end. For eastern Kentucky to change, a full-scale culture revolt needs to take place. The arts have to be claimed by writers and artists kicking and elbowing their way to the future, not by smirking and nodding in reverence to the past.



"Focus." Digital print shot with Fuji Finepix

"...a statue of a monk in lotus. I thought it a rather ironic juxtaposition given that it stares into space oblivious to everything but its pursuit of enlightenment. Much like we as humans stare without seeing. When first spying this shot I felt the idea of focus to compel the shot. My focus on the flower versus the statue versus the bigger picture."

David Harrity

Bugs to Beacons: Three Poets and the Spirit of Luminous Beauty

Nobody cares about poets anymore. Average readers are not interested in reading poems because there is a gap between the writer and the reader created by the poet—there is not as much accessibility as there is confusion. Poets are now polished artistic icons whose audience is hopelessly homogenous—poets read poets, which is a recipe for a dying art drowning in incest. The three poets represented here are points on a spectrum of poetic exploration of the conscious self. Each writes down experience in a different manner, hoping to capture the moment's mobile truth in a readable language. Any attentive reader—average or otherwise—can approach these poets with confidence that he or she will understand the scope and importance of a life lived in contemplative discipline. That is why they have been chosen for the inaugural issue of *Ontologica: A Journal of Art and Thought*—they are all thinking artists with distinct and venerable styles.

It is no secret that most readers in this country do not read poetry. Many individuals view poetry as frivolous—vague abstraction swaddled in needless linguistic gymnastics. Maybe the naysayers are right, but only to a certain degree. Because these three strike a balance between the lofty aims of poets to render experience into linear statements and the desire most all individuals possess: to share experience in hopes of cultivating human connectivity. These three poets want to make the least into the most, to bring big exposure to the small.

Amy Watkins's poetry grows out of candid experience and emphasis of connectivity. Her poems are grounded in true, accessible life and exhibit an enviable control and delicacy—they choose to frame experience without disguise, without a veil. In this prudent poise, Watkins demonstrates that mastery of technique, coupled with universal subject matter, can make the ostensibly prosaic moments hum with beauty and lasting splendor. In “Napping with My Daughter” she writes:

“I watch the minutes
on the bedside clock. I take shallow breaths
and listen for her breathing. She is the weight
above my heart. She is the labor in my lungs.”

With calculated restraint, Watkins binds an intimate moment of understanding with metrical lyric precision—her words are controlled and expressive, which gives them power. The loose iambic cadence of the lines drives the poem to a lovely brink, one that imitates the motions and sound of a child's sleep-breaths falling on a mother's loving ear. Her words are sweet as honey yet maintain a formal discipline—the paradox indicates both an eye and ear for beauty, capturing, with honesty, a kind of living simply.

Jae Newman is a Korean adoptee whose work reflects the tension of existence and identity between the ephemeral life of memories and dreamscapes—the sense-nature of reality meeting what *was* or what *could be* reality. His poems are an inquiry into the reaches and shadows of a life lived on two seemingly conflicted planes of experience, but after examination by the author himself, there arrives a growing contentment with place, person, and identity. Newman writes:

“... I find
the boy who disappeared in snow
has returned from a field where the sun was endless
in the land
that is no longer the land but a seed between my teeth,
a memory in fingernails.
My whole life—
How long
I shivered wondering if the storm within me
would ever allow me to touch a reflection
of my blood.” (The Hidden Door)

Newman's structure emphasizes the dual nature locked within his writing—the irony of feeling connected in disconnection, of feeling alive in mortality. His lines move between couplets and fragmented singularities. His diction also calls attention to this contrast. Words that hold an everlasting weight (sun, endless, land, memory) are contrasted with words that connote a fleeting experience (disappear, teeth, fingernails, shivered, blood). But this is no reason for him to give up hunting the ghost. Not simply a somnambulist wandering the reaches of his own visionary dreams, Newman attentively combs the space between his self and his world, hoping to find answers in the interstices, writing poems that coalesce the human and heavenly voices of identity. His intentional exploration grows from the need to understand his place in the world, an awareness—his poems come from an honest and worthwhile locale within.

David Tipton's poetry occupies without occupying anything at all. His poems—dense, meditative, and often philosophical or scientific—wander through space/time like a relativity experiment. Tipton's poetry is not simply *doing* something, but it *causing* something, a synaptic chain of existent (or maybe non-existent events) modes of human experience. In Tipton's work, Time is both absent and present, and the ruminations within each poem grow out of psychic observation. The language of his poems probes deep into a collective human psyche; thus, the poems occur *in medias res*:

“Meanwhile, there's this sad saffron moon
stuck in the corner of an evening bedroom window whispering “It's over, over now,
just gather your things and forget it; go now to the next square”: A sign-off,
I take it, of things as they were or as we thought—that at least will let flow in the
next setting—or anyway the next step toward some next unveiling.” (“Dissonance”)

Tipton's poetic ‘thought experiments’ (not unlike that of Einstein's) split measurable moments in to fragmented interjections where the past and future are eerily part of the immediate present. The lines, long and linguistically lavish, contain the din of a mind which is contrastingly moving and at rest, the quatrain structure unifying the wild nature of the lines. The poet finds his own existence locked within the lines themselves. Consequently, the reader is able to experience the same strange disjointed harmony.

Like fireflies captured inside a jar, the work of these poets controls and illuminates an internal existence in order to push the boundaries of perspective their poems are soft lights leading the way. The freedom and luminous beauty of the human spirit—philosophical, spiritual, emotional— is contained, if only for moments, to light the way for readers. It is done with seeming ease and precision, clear diction, and delightful play. As long as poets like these

three are working, it should be the task of every editor and critic to spin their hard work into a space that fights against the dying nature of this art. We should not give up on poetry yet, especially when there is so much dignified contemplation in the genre that is readable to a larger public.

ARTIFACTS

Before you officially become you, before
you begin the long road north
to be nothing
like your mother or father, let me
leave this map,
a stained glass song
lit up across the longest night
of your life.

*

The truth is
there is no truth but for the Lord. Everything
is fantasy, a maze
where what you want
is veiled in the hard rain of painted borders
you cannot cross.

*

Let me do a simple thing for you,
my little ocean in the womb. This string
from my heart, it sings
to your mother and now to you. Hold
its song in a jar, for what is lost
is lost forever, and what disappears
between us will be ransomed
in the place where you will be royalty,
where garlands of memory
are hung in your honor.

*

Below the gaze of others, I know who I am. I am
the man the waitress cannot hear. I am the father
telling a story he never heard as a boy. Before
you dismiss me, before I embarrass you,
as all fathers do, mind this:

to my father, the man who shot himself out of a cannon
and never returned,

I would listen to a thousand jokes I never liked,
I would wear his clothes and watch as others wondered

why our suit pants were rolled at the knee.

Dennis Waddell

Right: "Forever in Blue Jean."
Acrylic on wood, textile.

"Quilting together old torn jeans was a great way to create a uniquely textured canvas, as well as recycle old, useless material. They help make a statement about the casual approach that youth have in our society towards pregnancy and child rearing."



Bottom: "Start Digging." Acrylic and enamel on plexiglass and wood.

"There is absolutely a fascination in our country with death, and even a sexual fascination..."



THAT MAN

After five weeks of teaching poetry
to a rural class of seventh graders,

we prepare for our public reading. I tell

them to be confident, that
everyone wants them to do well. I ask,

Are there any questions?

One asks if I am *that man* who lives
just past the cemetery, the one

who no one understands. I tell him

I live an hour away near the mall.
Another boy who won't write a poem

sparks up and asks,

Did you work at Number 1 Buffet?
Maybe I am *that man*

and just don't know it.

Chelsea Pruckner

Edward Cullen: The Phenomenon

To read is to escape. Many read books in an attempt to evade their daily lives and go to alternate worlds where things are different and better than they are in reality. Reading permits us to become someone we are not, have something we do not, or experience something we otherwise never could. Often an understanding of human attraction developed through reading differs between generations. However, Stephenie Meyer unleashed a powerful tool when she published *Twilight*. Not only does it provide temporary relief from the sometimes dreary life that we are accustomed to, but it gives people of all ages a sense of hope, hope that otherwise can be lost rather quickly. This book has bridged the gap between generations and provided common ground for readers to relate to each other.

More Than Meets the Eye:

When first introduced to Edward, readers picture him as an attractive, and mysterious young man. We read further only to discover that he is actually a self-proclaimed vegetarian vampire, who simply longs to live a fairly normal existence. When explaining his eating habits Edward says, "I can't be sure, of course, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke." (Meyer 199) There is much more to Edward than originally appears to both Bella and the reader. He and the rest of his family simply "try to blend in." (Meyer 188).

All is Not Lost:

Edward represents hope: hope of an exciting and intense love that in general all people long to feel. In some way or another, we all want what Edward represents: passion, commitment, and an undying devotion to love. This intense emotion and depiction of a flawless male brings negative consequences for readers. Men of today are forced to attempt to live up to the superhuman standard that Edward Cullen sets for a significant other. Edward leaves women of all ages longing to have someone similar to who he is in their lives, and men longing to provide that need. Edward Cullen is single handedly whipping the misguided men of today back into shape by reintroducing our society to the idea of true love. He shows us that despite the apparent norm of vulgar language and sagging pants, the idea of a truly respectable and caring man may not be all that far out of touch. When Edward speaks to Bella he does so intelligently and without using vulgarity: "It would be more... *prudent* for you not to be my friend. But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella" (Meyer 84). Even though he is speaking intelligently, he is still intriguing and attractive to her, proving that intelligence is, contrary to teenage public belief, a positive quality.

He also makes it very clear that when you love someone to put their concerns above your own does not indicate weakness or submission, rather respect and devotion. At one point he says, "Don't you see, Bella? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved" (Meyer 190). He is showing us that to truly care about someone else is to consider their needs even before you consider your own. Edward wants more than anything to be with Bella and he makes that very clear, however he knows that it is not in her best interest and that sincerely bothers him. Edward shows men that a new kind of cool and attractive is coming back in style and encourages them to adapt.

The Universal Attraction:

Edward tugs at the heart strings of people of all ages and social classes. The book may be primarily geared toward pre-teens; however men, women, and children alike seem to be unable to put it down. In a survey done at an Arizona high school, students were interviewed about their thoughts on the novels. One of the young girls said:

Teenage girls are not the only people who enjoy the "Twilight" series. My grandmother and several guy friends read the books. My father has read them as well. (Goodwin)

It seems unusual for men to want to read romance novels, however this love story has wooed both sexes. The series unites them in a common goal to find the respectful and meaningful relationship that all people deserve. Edward is an object of affection and desire for most girls, and for men he is an example of the characteristics that women desire in a match. The movie shows Edward always opening doors for Bella, catching her before she falls, and just being there to help her when she gets herself into trouble. Edward's desire to protect Bella is revealed when she goes dress shopping with her friends and runs into the town boys who come dangerously close to harming her. Edward shows up just in time to save her and on the way home he says, "It was very... hard — you can't imagine how hard — for me to simply take you away, and leave them... alive" (Meyer 176). Edward is clearly bothered by the thought of someone harming Bella. He obviously cares deeply for her and couldn't stand the thought of something bad happening to her, just as all men should feel for the women they love.

For some, the romance is simply unrealistic and ridiculous. They see the idea of a vampire suppressing his innate desire to suck a human's blood in an effort to satisfy his stronger desire to love her, as incomprehensible. We realistically see this love as impossible,

in the same way that we see the relationship between Mina and Dracula in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to be ridiculous. The logistics of a vampire loving a human may not be all that reasonable, but that is not the point! This romance gives people hope, it lets them hold on to the idea that real, crazy, and passionate love exists in the world and it lets them believe that they may very well be able to find it. When we lose hope we lose almost all chance of achieving our goals. The renewed belief and hope that true love exists gives people the chance to go after their desires. While the material they are reading may be fictional, the effect it has on many is not. It encourages women to never settle for anything less than extraordinary while urging men to be nothing short of it. Hope of love is renewed through Edward Cullen. For those who have lost it, he provides the hope that they may find it again. For those who have never felt it, he provides hope that it will come eventually. And for those who have it, he provides a reminder that it is rare and should not be taken for granted. It is important to remember that the emphasis is on that feeling of hope, not the literal idea of a vampire loving a human.

A Leap of Faith:

Stephanie Wilken in "Teens Flock to Library for 'Twilight' Fete " discusses one of the problems with this series, saying, "Some are turned away by the unrealistic idea of a vampire living among humans and not harming them" (Wilken). It is important to remember that the book is really about love and passion, not the technicalities of being a vampire. These people should allow themselves to let go and embrace their fantasy, even if that fantasy is fairly improbable. I will agree that when taken literally the idea of a blood thirsty vampire living peacefully among a world full of his one true desire, human blood, is far fetched. But as I said earlier, look deeper, think about the love and desire that Edward represents. To find a person

who loves you as intensely as Edward loves Bella is not an uncommon or shameful goal, it is human nature to desire that feeling. Edward sums it up perfectly while trying to explain his feelings to Bella when he says, “you are exactly my brand of heroin” (Meyer 268). We all desire to be needed and wanted to that extreme of an extent, even if the relationship is not exactly practical. Think of even the most elementary examples of the lion falling for the lamb. In the Disney movie, *Beauty and the Beast*, this idea is clearly portrayed. The monster falls in love and has a soft spot for the beautiful girl, while the rest of the town is left wondering what she sees in such a creature. This is the same concept that *Twilight* enlists, except the rest of the town does not know Edward is really a monster; they simply find him odd. There is this incomprehensible attraction that exists between Edward and Bella that we find intriguing and somewhat desirable. The passion and commitment is so deep that only the two of them can understand it.

This novel brings older readers back to the days of their first over the top and intense love, while at the same time forcing younger people who have never experienced love to dream of something like the romance in *Twilight*. When Edward says things to Bella such as, “Bella, I couldn’t live with myself if I ever hurt you. ... You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me ever” (Meyer 274); it makes girls swoon. We all want to be told that we are the most important thing in someone’s life. By reading these books we are encouraged to never settle for anything less than the butterflies, to almost demand to be loved so intensely that it borders naiveté. Edward says, “Isn’t it supposed to be like this? The glory of first love, and all that. It’s incredible, isn’t it” (Meyer 302). This is exactly the point of these books, they let us experience or in some cases relive the overwhelming rush of a first love.

The Stephanie Wilken article also talks about *Twilight’s* appeal on readers, “it appeals

to most young women because 'any girl could replace their name with Bella's name.'" (Wilken)

The idea of being in such an intense relationship for any person, young or old, is intriguing. We want to experience the sometimes ridiculous and overly emotional feeling that this type of relationship forces us to feel. Nigel Andrews for the *Financial Times* said,

Twilight is like a woman's memory of that hormonal heyday called adolescence, when teenage female sexuality was a world involving dangerous, thrilling interaction with those testosterone units known as boys. A girl knew that to bare a neck to these creatures, if only at the back of a movie theatre was to put at eternal hazard her resistance and virginity. (Andrews)

Women of all ages ignore the fact that Edward is a vampire because they are so captivated by the idea of his love. Edward portrays that stereotypical bad boy turned good for the woman that he loves. He is dangerous which makes loving him even more exciting and emotional. Edward says, "It would be more... *prudent* for you not to be my friend. But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella" (Meyers 84). This forbidden type of love has been intriguing people since the beginning of written history. Even the ancient Greeks longed for an intensely emotional love and afforded themselves that experience through the story of Zeus and Io. Another early example is the relationship between Troilus and Chriseide, written by Chaucer. Not to be forgotten is the forbidden love between Romeo and Juliet. All of these stories pull at our desire to feel something real, even if it may not be in our best interest. We crave the excitement that goes along with such strong feelings.

Edward also plays directly into the dream of a tough guy who only has eyes for his girl and treats her like a princess. He protects her and loves her with everything he has without being obsessive or controlling, the majority of women dream of a man like this! This example set by Edward is steering women away from the direction of either the indifferent or the overly

controlling boyfriend, and introducing them to the world of the happy medium. We are shown that the cookie cutter personalities are a thing of the past, and combinations of the stereotypes do exist. Edward is also showing boys that it is ok to not be one thing or the other, and that being tough does not mean being indifferent.

Twilight is much more than just a book series. The characters become lifelike and real to the readers. When we read, that is what we want: to feel truly connected to a new world, almost like we are a part of it Edward Cullen gives hope to young and older women alike. He satisfies the reader's desire to find true love and feel genuinely connected to another person. All people want to fall in love. Reading these books renews that longing for true love in most people. Edward is single handedly bringing love back into the world one *Twilight* fan at a time.

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"Popcorn" Acrylic and oil paint with decoupage images on canvas

"The very real images of war and suffering versus the almost cartoon nature of death sitting upon the hourglass eating popcorn bring to light how we often view each other. Death watches the show that we seem to take so candidly, thus mirroring our indifference."

Drew Lackovic calls his fellow literary writers to task in this essay, reminding them that their's is an increasingly endangered art form. Presenting evidence ranging from publishing trends to postmodern theory, he makes the argument that fiction's best hope is not in trying to compete with television and cinema, but in offering the kind of experience only prose can. - RD

Drew Lackovic

Literary Fiction and the Road to Hell Or Why Just Telling a Good Story Won't Cut it Anymore in the Modern Age

I believe that the artist's fundamental loyalty must be to form, and his energy employed in the activity of making. Every other diddly desire can find expression; every crackpot idea or local obsession, every bias and graciousness and mark of malice, may have an hour; but it must never be allowed to carry the day. If, of course, one wants to be a publicist for something.; if you believe you are a philosopher first and Nietzsche second; if you think the gift of prophesy has been given to you; then, by all means, write your bad poems, your insufferable fictions, enjoy the fame that easy ideas often offer, ride the flatulent winds of change, fly like the latest fad to the nearest dead tree; but do not try to count the seasons of your oblivion. --William H. Gass, "Finding a Form"

Introduction—Literary Fiction, Too Good or Too Pretentious to Turn Profit?

As writers, especially writers of short fiction, we all come to a point in our careers when we look at the publishing trends, at the flashy agents, slamming book deals going to hot-shot authors that haven't even finished college yet, and wonder--"why go the literary fiction route?" Of course, most writers of literary fiction know that this genre doesn't pay, but why? Why do

we elevate, say the work of Annie Proulx over that of Dan Brown? Both authors' fiction has been 'deemed' good enough to hit the big screen (not that I'm saying film is the ultimate form of success), but why are writing programs at all levels so focused on cutting out the genre, and elevating the literary? I think all of us (by us I mean folks that pursue the whole MFA/creative writing track in the first place) are pushed in some way to look down upon the more lucrative styles of writing-- too formulaic, not enough character development, plot driven, etc as if all of these things are somehow bad. Look at Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, Dean Koontz, Dan Brown, even Jackie Collins. Every single one of those authors has made far more money than any of us in the "literary" field can hope to dream of. Yet we demonize them, criticize their writing style, and generally look down upon these genre masters; however, if Dan Brown can sell over 80 million copies of the *Da Vinci Code* ("Bio"), shouldn't we be asking, "What are we doing wrong?"

To write literary fiction, often times, is to say that you write above some sort of imaginary line of quality. Since literary fiction is more often character driven, has more active and complex language, and conforms to no pre-determined length or plot formula, we often say that this *must* mean literary is better than genre. But sales figures say otherwise. Is literary fiction just more pretentious? Are we puffing ourselves up for nothing? Many literary journals are cutting budgets and author stipends, and/or going on line in effort to cut costs. Contributor copies are more common fare than cash when dealing with publication on an individual basis. Sure the big names get paid enough to make a living, but in comparison to our genre-level brothers and sisters, there aren't very many of the literary camp that can pull a living salary out of writing alone (odd-jobs, judging contests, book tours, and most commonly, teaching are what help pay bills—all tasks that take time away from the writing desk).

Clearly, a problem seems to be emerging. At first glance, we might say, "the kids

today, they don't read anymore,” but that's a weak excuse, if it exists at all. Ask any teenage girl who Edward Cullen is. With franchises like *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, kids are reading more today than ever. Literary fiction is just missing out on its audience.

Audience is key. One of the hardest things for college freshmen coming into a composition class to understand is the idea of audience. When their first papers come limping to me, they all ring with a voice that is directed to some generic academic hole; one that is vaguely familiar with everything, but one that also needs words like “Wisdom” tagged with a definition from Dictionary.com (as an attempt to fulfill a citation requirement). In short, their writing doesn't care about its readers, nor is it aware of them. MFA and other creative writing programs stress audience too; I'm not entirely sure we're listening. Some of us are—Chuck Palahniuk, for example, has a very narrow and developed audience appeal (macabre, grotesque, and gritty fiction with a high penchant for violent and/or counter-cultural influences), but on a large scale most of the fiction coming out today has a pretty consistently grey pan to the audience—it tries to reach as many as possible, and to do that, today's literary fiction isn't reaching much of anyone. While I'm not saying that all literary fiction can (or should) be marketed to every reader, we do however need to take a more active approach to considering our audience than the current trend, where we assume that readers of class and other writers will be most interested in our work, that the common person is somehow below our writing, that they can't possibly grasp the complexities of our creations. This is pure snobbery, and if we want literature to continue to evolve, it needs to stop.

Part of this problem, in my eyes, stems from the current du jour literary movement: contemporary realism. By default most writers of literary fiction write stories that more or less happen in an ontology that very accurately mirrors our world—in other words, these stories

could be sold as non-fiction, and so long as no one did any fact checking, they'd be believable on face value. Since "write what you know" is almost always a mantra in undergrad and MFA writing workshops alike, it's only natural that our stories are set in the world we know best; it's a tried and true method of representation that has withstood the test of time throughout the span of the written word. However, with the drastic increase in instant-gratification styled media—from TV and movies to YouTube, Hulu, and even Facebook, the old standard of straight representation of the world is starting to show its age.

Here's how. Nearly every book that has hit critical and national acclaim has become or has at least been optioned to become a movie. *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels & Demons*, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, *Fight Club*, *The Road*, *No Country for Old Men*, I could go on forever. While some of these made for movie adaptations didn't pan out so well, largely the movies gross well, and, if anything, drive more people to read the books. However, I see this as somewhat problematic. If a book can easily be made into a movie, and more people will be willing to see the movie than read the book, why is it necessary for the book to exist in the first place? Aside from some depth that doesn't make it off the cutting room floor, what more does the book version offer over the movie version? In many ways the movie version robs readers of perhaps the most important aspect of a book—the mental imagery we create in the process of reading. No one today can faithfully read *The Lord of the Rings* without imagining Elijah Wood as Frodo—our ability to fabricate that reality has been damaged by a larger cultural image, which in turn robs personal experience. Thinking along these lines, it's easy to see a potential end to written literature, as all narratives move from word to screen.

However, not all books can become movies. Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, a labyrinth of ontological existence would never clearly translate to the big screen. Yet in that

impossibility, I see true opportunity for literary beauty. Not only that, but *House of Leaves* despite its quite obvious difficulty went on to be a best seller, and is available in several editions, and languages. What I think is most important to point out here is the status of this book; it cannot transcend into another media format without losing everything. It is intrinsically and permanently fiction. Because of its tie to the world of the written word, I'd argue that pound for pound, *House of Leaves* and those works that require the written format will shape the face of fiction's next wave. And until we, as literary writers, get hooked on this idea—that fiction must stay on the page, and not aspire to the screen, our genre-level peers will continually outstrip our profitability because of its ease of existence in the mass market realm. Quite bluntly, we need to revitalize literary fiction by establishing its existence on the page as its prime point of necessity. If we want to drive the evolution and success of the written word, our words must be written expressly for the purpose of reading. Perhaps the easiest way to pull this off is to follow in the footsteps of Mark Danielewski, David Foster Wallace, Steven Hall, and others by creating fiction that works visually on the page as strongly as the language carries the story—all of the postmodern advocates apply here.

But, I don't think structural screwity is the end-all be-all to the problem at hand—although its tenets drive fiction in the direction of enforcing its own existence, the deviation from standard narrative vastly limits audience, and as I said before, rebuilding our audience is one of the key necessities of revitalizing fiction. Another route to revitalizing literary fiction is to address the “So What?” factor. One of the primary downfalls of any type of realist fiction is that once the story is told, there isn't much more going on aside from a few metaphors, and perhaps some thematic elements. In many ways, I see literary fiction in the contemporary realism vein to be often times indistinguishable from genre fiction's primary aim; to entertain by telling a good story. If literary fiction is to be the sort of high-brow driving force of fiction, it

cannot simply tell a story, because doing so sacrifices the advances made throughout the 20th century by modernist and postmodernist authors. Both movements took readers far beyond the simple story, and forced us to face both epistemological and ontological dilemmas, which, in effect, deepened our understanding of the world around us. We cannot let literary fiction let this sort of intellectual push fall to the wayside.

Begin at the beginning the end somewhere in between OR Enter Postmodernism

Late 1960s, social, civil chaos and upheaval. Here in the US, Vietnam = Devil, Race riots, Hippies, and lots of damning The Man. Amid this, the quiet little world of fiction struggled along with the rest of the world. Critics and other notables began muttering that “the novel was dead,” that “every story had been told.” Oh how vain we were. Around that time, John Barth, published “The Literature of Exhaustion” in *The Atlantic*, though many wrote the essay off as being yet another doom and gloom voice predicting the final sputtering of literature, Barth uncovered within that essay the works of Jorge Luis Borges, and used Borges' writings to illuminate new potential for the novel. Early on in the essay, Barth identifies a problem with contemporary writing:

A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them less interesting...than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges. (66)

Barth continues saying,

Our century is more than two-thirds done; it is dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Balzac, when the question seems to

me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers. (67)

Although Barth's essay comes at what's commonly viewed as the beginning of the postmodern movement (or the beginning of the codification of the postmodern movement), the problem he identifies is one we still face today. How do we as writers transcend our literary predecessors? In our current generation, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William H. Gass, Susan Sontag, and Tim O'Brien could all serve as good focal points for our own literary transcendence.

So how does Borges build on that which Joyce and Kafka left? During a time in which many were saying that the novel was dead, that everything that could be written was written, Borges began employing the novel against itself. The most clear example of this, which Barth also covers, is "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," where "by an astounding effort of imagination, produces—not *copies* or imitates, but *composes*—several chapters of Cervantes's novel (Barth 68). Whereas imitation and copying are comparable to frivolous experimentation, Borges, takes the notion farther by placing Menard's text in direct comparison of the original and then makes commentaries upon the historiographic significance between the two (identical) versions. Barth sees this as a way out of the perceived death of the novel because,

Borges *doesn't* attribute the *Quixote* to himself, much less recompose it like Pierre Menard; instead, he writes a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. (69)

In effect, Borges' story (and many of his other stories) creates a feedback loop where the reader finds himself stuck somewhere in the middle of the story's ontology. On one hand you

have the real *Quixote* existing in our world, but you also have this character, Pierre Menard, who wrote his own contemporary version, which happens to be identical to the original we know, but exists only within the fictional ontology of Borges' world. The idea here, called by Borges “contamination of reality by dream” (qtd. in Barth 71), becomes one of the driving forces of what soon will be labeled the postmodern movement. The reason such a device works so well is that

it turns the artist's mode or form into a metaphor for his concerns, as does the diary-ending of *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* or the cyclical construction of *Finnegans Wake*. In Borges' case..it's a paradigm of or metaphor itself; not just the *form* of the story but the *fact* of the story is symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message. (71)

Where the modernists used point of view to define and obscure epistemological Truth (with a capital T), works of Borges and other postmodernist contemporaries begin to bring the worlds of their creations into direct collision with our world. No longer can we deal with just one universal world; we must consider all the other infinite possibilities (that are shelved in Borges Library of Babel).

One of postmodernism's greatest assets is that its theoretical consistency is one of everything and nothing. You find the postmodern dipping its fingers in the detective story genre, slurping on science fiction, and cracking its knuckles before thundering down the stairs to brawl up some modernism. From a writing standpoint, you can approach postmodernism from any background and feel equally at ease; literally anything goes¹. Perhaps at first this doesn't seem like an obvious benefit—too broad to really be of any use; however so take a look at another dominant writing genre—Southern fiction. Here you have a well documented,

1 The true trick is to make “anything go” over well on the reader.

deeply developed genre of literary fiction that is firmly seated both in place and in the spirit of the South. Try breaking into that genre while living north of the Mason Dixon. Postmodernism is like the Church of Everything; it has tricks up every one of its infinite sleeves, and they are all available to drive strong literary narrative at any time.

But postmodernism, as a movement, was also a flash in the pan. It became big at the same time Americans were questioning everything else in their world; the postmodern state of rejecting capital 'T' truth coincided nicely with such sentiment, but at the same time, it's very difficult for most people to consciously live knowing that there is no Truth, so once the Hippies simmered down and The Man wasn't quite bad enough to damn continuously anymore, this rush of ideas slowed. Sure you have the big names: Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, William H. Gass, Susan Sontag, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Donald Bartholome, Mark Danielewski, Tim O'Brien, Robert Coover, etc, but the aftermath of the 60s' cultural revolution left fiction pretty much right where it was going before Barth wrote "The Literature of Exhaustion," Contemporary Realism.

The New Wave?

Around 2000, though, when *House of Leaves* was finally coming on the scene, Michiko Kakutani wrote an article for *The Critic's Notebook* in the *New York Times* called "New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature." In it, she too talks about the stagnation of literature after the rush of the 60s' revolution:

Flummoxed by the surreality of history and the mind-boggling changes unleashed by the 60's, many writers in that era became minimalists, withdrawing, turtlelike, inside their own homes and heads. Their characters tended to speak in grudging nonsequiturs, and their spiky, anorexic narratives—

concerning the mysteries of identity and the difficulty of connection—attested to a cautious mood of alienation and numbness....As Phillip Roth has observed, reality at the time seemed so stupefying, so maddening that most novelists simply abandoned the effort to grapple with “the grander social and political phenomena of our times,” turning instead “to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds and to a celebration of the self.” (Kakutani)

Through this critique, the avoidance of larger socio-political issues in favor of narcissistic pursuits establishes one of the primary failing points of contemporary realism. That Kakutani draws a parallel between this type of writing and a sort of sheltered, turtle-like behavior becomes a stark point of contrast when she begins comparing this type of writing to this “new wave” saying that these new authors “had grown up with discontinuity and flux. Chaos was not intimidating to them; it was simply how things were.” And because writers like David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, and Mark Danielewski embrace the chaos of the modern world, they are able to break out of the turtle shell and “[tackle] the crazy, multifarious reality they see around them head-on, trying to cram all its information-age effluvia willy-nilly into the pages of their books” (Kakutani). Essentially their acceptance of the global explosion and inter-connection of information before us precipitates their ability to once again attest to larger and more culturally influential works of literature.

And more often than not, their works become, in themselves, highly visual objects. Not only are the current generation of writers “influenced...by their literary precursors,” but as Douglas Rushkoff puts it, they are part of the “screenage” generation, where influence also comes from

Channel surfing, Web browsing and the sort of cross-cutting pioneered by filmmakers like Robert Altman and Quentin Tarantino have given them a

decidedly nonlinear outlook on the world, and it's helped them push the elliptical, modernist formulations of their predecessors to another level. (qtd. In Kakutani)

And through this visual stimulation, the new vein of postmodernists (or whatever you want to call us) have a direct line (maybe even WiFi [you never know these days]) to the core audience: Everyone is becoming increasingly connected and increasingly computer savvy². In my final section of this essay, I'll come back to this idea of global inter-connectivity, and how we as authors can use it to drive our own market. (If you want, here's a direct link to that part of the document: [Outro-Where do We go From Here?](#)).

The Structure of Screwiness—Making a Text Intrinsically a Text

Structurally, approaching fiction from a postmodern standpoint can work on building connection with your audience and drawing your story out beyond the uninspiring tenets of contemporary realism by utilizing any of the following elements:

- Consciousness towards the visual appearance of the fiction
 - Employing usage of things like
 - Short chapter headings
 - Lists
 - Whitespace
 - Graphics/Imagery
 - Links
 - text blocks (text within a text [parenthetical statements, footnotes, separate narratives, etc])
 - different fonts/formatting
 - anti-linear flow
- Harnessing the power of Ontology
 - Don't allow the reader to assume that the world within the book is the same as the world in which the reader is reading the book.
 - Create ontological tension by forcing several worlds to impinge upon each other
- Assume the reader is a participator
 - Incorporate
 - puzzles
 - games

² With notable exceptions of my Mother and Dave Harrity

- directly addresses to the reader
- connect to “real” events within the story

If the Audience Is Visual, Draw a Damn Picture Already.

Recently, according to Newsday.com, first time author, Reif Larsen was paid just shy of \$1 Million for his first novel (*Ciuraru*). He's 29. His novel, *The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet* simultaneously incorporates maps, images, charts and other visual regalia with the novel's text. Though such a notion of illustration isn't new (look only to children's books), it does provide somewhat new ground for literary fiction. But truly, why shouldn't it? We're all immersed in a deeply visual culture; playing to that in our texts is certainly one way to cater to our audience.

But at the same time, you don't need an art degree to publish good fiction. Mark Danielewski, Helen DeWitt, and Steven Hall are three excellent references of other modern authors employing significant visuals in their work. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski includes several collages as part of the “evidence” regarding items the narrator Johny Truant finds in Zampanò's apartment. Helen DeWitt, in *The Last Samurai*, not only references Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* as one of the most integral themes of the novel, but also includes a wide variety of non-English text—tables of different alphabets, Japanese Kanji, as well as mathematical formulas and other text-but-not-text kinds of elements. Steven Hall goes even further by using text to create ASCII art in the form of sharks and other thought fish in his novel *The Raw Shark Texts*, where throughout the book, text itself becomes a living embodiment, and often is used either to protect from or to spawn different sentient creatures made-of and living-within text. These direct type visual connections, like with Larsen's work above, give the visual reader something more than a boring wash of paragraph after paragraph. And by breaking the monotony of traditional “literary” pages, a sort of “something

to look forward to” effect is established. While chapters transitions often facilitate a good starting/stopping point, these visual elements tend to work like a tension building device. Most readers will flip through a book before reading it—to gage font size, chapter length, etc, and so when visual elements are present, they establish in the reader's mind a new layer of interest—what is the connection between the book and the visual element? Why is it there? Etc. Since we aren't yet geared to expect the visually appealing in our literary fiction, these elements, when included, often become like islands within the sea of surrounding text. From this vantage, they act as a sort of point of reflection; they add depth and provide a pausing point where the reader can connect the pieces of the work together before continuing. In addition to this, visual elements will generally add to whitespace, which will both quicken the pace of the current section, and also help reign in straying attention spans, which these days, are often pulled in several directions at once.

Plain text is so last century

Beyond generating visual interest, atypical structural elements, (also known as elements of “Structural Screwity” as labeled by Rod Dixon in a fiction workshop a few years back), add further purpose and meaning within a postmodern text. One of the most primary elements of employing structural screwity is to help build up the effect of metafiction³ employed within a story. Since metafiction itself is rather weak in a direct sense—as in we all are very familiar with the simple story within a story or story about another story (think *The Princess Bride*), using non-standard structural elements help create a sort of “unfinished” effect, or they can be used to further develop and heighten tension surrounding the disparity

3 Almost universally, writing workshop instructors will react with revulsion to the notion of using metafiction within a story for the simple reason that most people aren't willing to go all the way and do it right. When poorly executed, metafiction comes off as authorial snobbery that condescends to the clueless reader (who is clueless due to the fact that the author doesn't know how to entertain an audience).

between the ontology of the book and the ontology of our world. A classic example of this, of course comes from John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," where he incorporates the drawn image of Freytag's triangle of dramatic events (which visually represents nearly all stories from Exposition to Rising Action to Climax to Denouement) (Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse" 95). Through this image, Barth forces the reader to reckon with the present story's lack of conformity with Freytag's triangle as well as understand how Ambrose, the narrator of the story, is employing Freytag's triangle to communicate the notion that life doesn't always fit into a nice prepackaged pattern; a notion that further problematises the moment, since his "life" is one rendered in fiction, not reality. So in effect, this one abnormal structural element is pulling the story in no less than three directions (and I could probably draw that out further if I were to examine it's relevance in the face of the funhouse motif, the location of the actual climax in the story, etc). The point being though, that such an insertion adds a great amount of dynamic activity to the nature of the story; it ensures that the story can't just exist and be consumed, we have to question its existence, and how it conforms (or doesn't conform to) preconceived notions of existence. In short, we take a standard narrative, read it and think nothing of it's existence, but when a story begins to take on a metafictional state, we can't just accept the story on face value; the entire work—paper, cover matter, etc all become part of the formula.

The world *is* the book

A perfect example of this is Ben Marcus' *Age of Wire and String*. Early on, in a section called "Argument," the unnamed narrator tells us

This book is a catalog of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond....a collection of studies that might serve to clarify the terms obscured within every facet of the living program.

There is no larger task than that of cataloging a culture, particularly when that culture has remained willfully hidden to the routine in-gazing practiced by professional disclosers, who, after systematically looting our country of its secrets, are now busy shading every example of so-called local color into their own banal hues. (3)

This introduction is setting the reader up for a series of stories that, on the surface, don't seem to make a whole lot of sense, but the narrator continues, explaining away our confusion by saying "the outer gaze alters the inner thing, that by looking at an object we destroy it with our desire, that for accurate vision to occur the thing must be trained to see itself, or otherwise perish in blindness, flawed" (3-4). This means that we as readers (outsiders by default) are looking in at something that by all means is unattainable to us. For that reason, we can begin to understand, or try to accept the shocking oddity of the book's seemingly strange usage of language and definitions. Near the middle of the book, we find a story, "The Animal Husband," where the narrator identifies himself as the son of the father and that his task is to pick up where his father left off by writing and collecting the writings together into this binding (i.e. The book we're holding) (104). This moment, though doesn't happen until about 2/3 of the way into the book; while this sort of tactic brings to mind the greatest obstacle of postmodern writing—keeping your audience around for the punchline, when this punchline hits, it throws the entire text into perspective to the point that we understand that everything, even the dedication "for Father" (Marcus), has meaning for the rest of the text.

Generally with conventional fiction, much of the external material, acknowledgments, dedications, etc have no bearing on the actual text of the novel, but *Age of Wire and String* as well as other novels like *House of Leaves* use their metafictional/ontological status to make the text's existence exceedingly more complex. The title page of *House of Leaves* indicates

that it is “by Zampanò with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant.” Danielewski's name is on the page previous, already setting the author apart from the ontological “truth” of *House of Leaves* (The entire purpose of the book is to detail the existence of a non-existent documentary called *Navidson's Record*). Furthermore, the book is also stacked with several asides and footnotes belonging to “the Editors” whom are unnamed throughout the novel.

Of course, utilizing metafiction in this manner has three distinct advantages over weaker forms of metafiction:

1. it encourages the reader to participate more actively in the story and
2. it foregrounds the power and importance of the ontology that the book or story projects.
3. it encourages the reader to want to revisit the book once the metafictional punchline is reached; which not only extends the life of the book, but also creates multiple different readings of the same text.

“Change Anything Passive Into Something Active”

Passive reading, or beach reading, or whatever you want to call it is very dangerous to literature. Whenever we can tune out and veg while reading, it indicates that whatever we're reading is likely 1. highly visual 2. fast paced/action packed 3. not very intellectual. While we shouldn't always strive for intellectual content, passive reading material, is never going to stand out to us, and likely would translate just as easy to a truly passive form of entertainment: Television. Reading, regardless of content, requires more work than watching television; therefore it's not truly a passive endeavor. For that reason, the quality of what we read should transcend a passive alternative—if you're going to put in the effort, why not walk away with something of value? Garnering reader participation will definitely force the reader out of passive mode and into a more active reading situation. As writers we can establish this

easily through foregrounding the ontological separation between our world and the world of the fiction at hand. If we deny the reader's ability to forget that they are reading words on a page, or if we can make the reader question the validity of the words on the page (or the validity of the world around us), then we have successfully established a link to force the reader into a more active role. Active readers will, in turn, be more inclined to get more out of the text (maybe even give multiple readings to it), as well as simply being able to experience a more deep scope of the fiction's ontology.

My World Is Different Than Your World

As far as ontologies go, fiction has the ability to develop worlds in far greater detail than other forms of media with the notable exception of MMORPG type games (in this case I'm thinking SecondLife, and probably we as writers could learn a lot from how places like that grow into their own very detailed worlds out of thousands of people's contributions). Think about the movies. When you go, the theater is darkened to create a tunnel vision effect (which is enhanced further by curved screens and 360 degree sound if you go to an IMAX); when watching a movie at the theater, effectively you are placed within the world of the movie, but you are also limited to being a voyeur only. Perhaps in the future, we'll have Simsense decks (like in the cyberpunk role-playing game *Shadowrun*), where you can drop yourself into the persona of any actor in a movie and see/taste/feel/smell/hear the entire movie from that persona, but for now, all we can do is watch.

The ontological boundaries in fiction are far more nebulous. All along I've been highlighting the notion that playing with the boundary between our world and the world(s) of the fiction we read enhances our experience. In addition to this, fiction can employ postmodern tactics that involve the reader's conscious decisions to shape the outcome of the

story. Some fictions are more obvious in this construction like Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, where the book mirrors a Choose Your Own Adventure Book style, allowing the reader to piece the novel together in an infinite array of possibilities. Other books like *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* by William H. Gass force the reader to choose between parallel narratives developing both in the primary body text and in a footnote section; the order in which the sections are read, again will affect the overall outcome and feel of the work. Ultimately the difference here is obvious; works of fiction with a postmodern twist have the ability to take readers farther down the rabbit hole than other less active methods of entertainment. Any book that can create within itself a sort of "Garden of Forking Paths" to borrow from Borges' story title, is one that will reach beyond the slush pile of conventional texts.

I Hate Postmodernism, So [Now] What?

A while ago, I taught *The Age of Wire and String* to the Warrior Poet Group, and it went over pretty poorly. Simply, not everyone has the patience for all of that tightly wound structural screwity. Postmodernism, for all it's depth, clearly isn't going to be *the* way to breakthrough to readers in a unique manner. Postmodernism is sort of the structural way to ensure that fiction is presented exactly as that—fiction. Let's now move into some theory on how to develop content that does the same thing.

Recently I started teaching Composition, and at my school we teach it as Academic Argument (everything the kids read or write has to be an argument), and when the students start learning how to introduce their arguments, oftentimes the biggest problem they hit is that they forget to qualify a cost to the problem at hand, leaving me as the reader saying "So what?" (as in why should I care about lowering the drinking age to 18?). I started applying this idea to fiction, and I found that a lot of the structurally conventional fiction I like tends to

answer that question of “So what?”⁴ And those stories that can't, to me, seem to be most often the stories that 1. can be read passively or 2. would work just as easily as television programs as they do stories. What this boils down to, essentially, is a list of aesthetics that, subjectively, define purpose in a story. Story elements like metaphor, motif, and symbolism to me are a means, not an end, and those stories that employ such elements as an end almost always leave me saying “so what” by the end. Kelly Link's “Stone Animals” comes to mind in this respect. The story, anthologized in *Best American Short Stories 2005*, weighs in just around 40 pages, and if I remember correct (I pawned my copy of the book last year), in her liner notes, she mentioned that the original version was over 90 pages. Her writing is very strong, and she employs excellent visuals, with a steady build of weird magical-realism type events, but the end of the story, featuring an army of little rabbit warriors ready to lay siege on the house left me aghast; structurally and stylistically, I couldn't see any real purpose for such an ending to come about, especially considering all of the tension built between the increasingly estranged family. All the beautiful detail in the world does not make a good short story.

Another such instance of a failed “so what” is John Barth's story “Ad Infinitum: A Short Story” from his collection On With the Story. The story itself, while somewhat interesting in its use of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, in the long run provides little more than a literary application of said formula. Doing so without good structural or content driven reasons at best will leave the reader saying “neat” and at worst the reader will be turned off to such structural screwities because the reader just involved himself with all that work for nothing.

4 A quick aside example: Wells Tower's “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” on the surface is a story about a viking raiding party. It answers the “So What” question for me in its execution: the characters' dialog and rationality reflect 21st century customs/norms, but yet they still mix and work with the medieval setting, and this clash between new and old provides a true dynamic beyond the simple, consumable story.

A third example of a failed “so what” happens through the poor usage of metafiction in Kirby Gann's *Napoleon in Rags*. Throughout the entire novel the narrator remains anonymous until the very very end of the book, where Gann reveals a somewhat bit-part character, Lambret Dellinger, as the master narrator of the story. Lambret refrains from revealing his hand in the creation of the novel until its second to last page, when he finally states, “And me? I am no longer the boy Lambret Dellinger....It is enough to have realized, in setting down this story, that transformations are possible” (Gann, 210). Up until Lambret's reveal, we as readers have developed an “understanding” towards the form and function of the novel, but by having a character claim to be the book's narrator/author, Gann forces us to throw out our understanding of the novel's form and forces upon us a state of metafictional ontology. By making this leap so late in the game, I am reticent to believe that such an action is 1. effective and 2. necessary. The problem: because of the reveal said character now becomes privy to far more information than he could have ever known, therefore making large sections of the novel either “fabricated” (by this narrator) or making the character somehow omniscient, which violates the ontology set forth by Gann, when he set the book's world to be relatively normal and similar to “the real world.”

Hey Narcissist, this is for you

So how do we as writers overcome the “so what” effect? To start off, consider the state of the American demographic. As far back as 1979, Christopher Lasch identified America as being a distinctly narcissistic society. What this means is that due to increasing personal and sociological safety, we spend less time worrying about covering daily necessities to life: food, shelter, etc, and in turn, have more time to develop the self. However, this rise of individuality isn't as beneficial as one might think:

Today Americans are overcome not by the sense of endless possibility but by the banality of the social order they have erected against it. Having internalized the social restraints by means of which they formerly sought to keep possibility within civilized limits, they feel themselves overwhelmed by an annihilation boredom, like animals whose instincts have withered in captivity. A reversion to savagery threatens them so little that they long precisely for a more vigorous instinctual existence. (Lasch 11)

The danger here is two-fold. From the reader's perspective, this advancing culture of narcissism is empowering a population of numb thrill-seekers—not necessarily cliff diving, but seekers of any type of thrill that will rekindle the essence of feeling if even for a moment. From the author's perspective, Lasch notes that many of us have an increasing difficulty achieving the necessary detachment to make good art (17). Since we aren't able to reckon ourselves into a sufficiently detached state, instead we are relying “on mere self-disclosure to keep the reader interested, appealing not to his understanding but to his salacious curiosity about the private lives of famous people” (Lasch 17). So in combination, readers are getting their thrills out of seeing authors delivering thinly-veiled “truths” about their own lives. To me, this sounds like another type of Reality TV, which, is exactly not what fiction needs to be doing. So how do we cater to our audience with “thrilling” content without turning ourselves into an episode worthy of daytime TV?

The Business Writing handbook I use advises students to constantly try to employ what they call the “You” Viewpoint, which “is based on the principle that most readers are naturally more concerned about their own needs than they are about those of a writer or a writer's organization....Because the benefit to the reader is stressed, the writer is more likely to motivate the reader to act” (Alred 570). It makes perfect sense that we as writers should

want to capture as wide of an audience base as possible, so one of the easiest ways to do this is to first acknowledge that our readers are invariably going to be narcissists. They don't care how distinguished, rich, beautiful, etc we are as authors; they just want something that will entertain them for as long as they feel the need to be entertained by a book. So when you're writing your next story and you hit revision stage, start asking yourself, "Why does this section need to be here? What will the reader get out of it? How does this story benefit the reader? Why wouldn't a reader like this story?" And we all know the statistics here; readers generally don't read all that far into something before dropping it, so if you don't rig up some catchy important stuff to intrigue your audience, they won't make it to the literary goldmine on page 10.

Bang for their Buck

Building on this notion of the narcissistic reader, we also need to consider what the reader will walk away with. We all hate feeling cheated when we are let down by the quality of our purchases, so it's only natural that writers, and artists of all manner, would want to put out something of quality. Quality, of course, is a hard-to-nail-down notion. I remember in college reading Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance⁵ and his conversations on quality, namely whether it is "better" to use official factory parts to repair a broken motorcycle (also using an official factory mechanic to do the work [at a premium, of course]), or to do-it-yourself with an aluminum can that, in the instance of the example, was exactly what was needed. Digging back further in my memory, Pirsig divided Quality up into two general definitions: Romantic Quality and Classic Quality, with the very boiled down difference being that Romantic Quality is more concerned with appearance and short-term

5 A book I've been greatly meaning to re-read...as soon as I can figure out whom I lent my copy to.

functionality, whereas classical quality works more on the long term, they-don't-make-things-like-they-used-to end (as in Classical Quality would be the things “they used to make” [whomever “they” are]).

What all of this means to us as writers is exactly this: we need to offer something in our fiction that our audience can't easily get elsewhere. Books, in a lot of ways, are rapidly becoming “a thing of the past.” We've talked about movies, and the influence of TV and the Internet; it's no surprise that as a whole we read less simply for the reason that we've replaced that reading time with TV or Internet time. So when we offer up our fictive endeavors, the principles of quality should be forefront. And I'm thinking that the notion of Classical Quality, with tones of long-term benefit, is something we should very much try for. One advantage of books is that they're static, small, and collectible. They stick around. TV shows stay on your TiVO for a couple weeks, and maybe, maybe will be picked up on DVD if it's something like *Six Feet Under* or *Carnivale*. Books too have an advantage over Visual media in being very inexpensive. Half.com has some of the best books in the world available for \$0.75 + media mail shipping. So with availability and collectibility, books have a great potential to be purchased, and if we think on the long term, think about creating something that will invite *multiple reads*, then we have a real cornerstone on quality.

Since reading is more active than TV, the experience [can be] more intense than visual media. Therefore, when we craft our works, it behooves us not only to pay very close to the language we use, but also poetic flow, and depth of content. Take a look at Stephen King's writing, for example. Though he is arguably one of the most popular writers of the modern era, the way he uses language within his fiction is clunky at best, and downright jarring at worst. Jason Lee Miller's Essay “Quantum Fiction” (page 96), addresses this in more thorough detail, dealing with the rhythm of words, but here's a snippet to run as a corollary:

...there is something about his prose rhythm that often reminds me of a flat tire— abrupt and floppy and noisy and flapping: “She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn’t get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day’s rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back” (On Writing 22).... Upon closer inspection, those two sentences have no discernible meter, and the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables is very uneven, perhaps *too* random in placement. (As an aside, it also occurs to me that too much randomness makes probability calculation impossible, and could even contribute to the suspense in King’s stories.) The rhythm pulls me out of the dream perhaps because the mathematics of the rhythm just didn’t work out in my internal continuum. (Miller 110-111)

In addition to Miller's analysis to the above quoted King section, notice that all of the action is abstracted here. We're given a description of what happened, and this description is both sparse on detail and heavily passive: “began screaming,” “had developed,” “were forced.” The actual action verbs here, are also relatively weak: “said,” “swam,” “get,” “tried.” With any sense of real action removed from the situation through passive/weak action verbs, this passage not only clunks along as we read, but it doesn't give us any sharp stunning detail to hold on to. Compare this to Danielewski in *House of Leaves*:

At nearly ninety miles per hour, she zipped us u p to that windy edge known to some as Mullholland, a sinuous road running the ridge of the Santa Monica mountains, where she then proceeded to pump her vehicle in and out of turns, sometimes dropping down to fifty miles per hour only to immediately gun it back up to ninety again, fast, slow, fast-fast, slow, sometimes a wide turn, sometimes a quick one. She preferred the tighter ones, the sharp controlled jerks, swinging

left to right, before driving back to the right, only so she could do it all over again, until after enough speed and enough wind and more distance than I'd been prepared to expect, taking me to parts of this city I rarely think of and never visit, she dipped down into some slower offshoot, a lane of lightless coves, not stopping there either, but pushing further on until she finally found the secluded spot she'd been heading for all along, overlooking the city, far from anyone, pedestrian or home, and yet directly beneath a street lamp, which as far as I could tell, was the only street lamp around for miles (88).

Again we have two sentences (though somewhat Faulknerian), both recounted experience (in this case Johnny Truant is recounting in a footnote), but notice how melodic and active these sentences are. In Miller's essay, he says a possible explanation of King's diction could be to mimic the ebb/flow of the tides; however he also states that it wasn't working for him (and I agree; it doesn't work for me either). In Danielewski's case, however, we have similar construction, where he uses non-endstop punctuation to keep the sentence flow at a somewhat erratic, break neck pace, helping us to conceptualize this night time trip up Mulholland Drive. Also, you'll notice that this section is loaded with alliterative elements, primarily an "s" sound, which of course is building a sense of shushing, speeding, swerving through the turns. Also notice the great amount of detail both through verb usage and descriptive nouns. From this section alone we know place (California; LA), that the driver likes to drive aggressively, that the narrator is somewhat in over his head ("more distance than I'd been prepared to expect..."), and lastly a fairly detailed setting of where they end up. Danielewski packs in a lot here. But what interests me here is that in addition to the detail (which by far I think stands on its own as a driver for good Quality fiction), this particular section is sampled, read by Danielewski himself on his sister's song "Hey Pretty (remix)" from

her album Haunted, (which is based upon *House of Leaves*). Listening now to the song, Danielewski's reading cadence slides seamlessly into the beat of the song. Since Danielewski paid so close attention to his diction here, he's developed something vivid that sticks with the reader⁶. In addition to the linguistic power of the section, we also have a very intentional ontological clash. The passage is dubbed into a track about the book that the passage comes from; and the book is about a documentary that doesn't exist. In a way this external reference in Poe's song (and to a degree all of the Haunted album), serves to create another layer of "proof" to the validity of Truant's and Zampanò's research into *The Navidson Record*.

Oh So you're a Mr. Smarty-pants, are you?

While I think the notion of elegant language sort of walks hand in hand with literary fiction, another element that could use more focus is intellectual content. Within this issue of *Ontologica*, Jason Miller's "Quantum Fiction" (page 96) spends considerable time unmasking parallels between quantum physics, string theory, and how our minds can apply these ideas to fiction; through his analysis, we see how authors like Borges can create whole worlds out of potential alone, giving the reader incredible room for expansion. Rod Dixon's "True Will?: Crowley's Holy Guardian Angel, The Self, and Nietzsche" (page 126) ruminates upon his experiences researching the Abramelin Operation for his current novel-in-progress. This essay, as with much of Rod's fiction is deeply rooted in existential philosophy. His characters often struggle most with the notion of Self and what exactly should be done, which is something that in a narcissistic society could be very beneficial to the reader. Readers, when conceived as mass consumers (and face it, all Americans are mass consumers), often find

⁶ As an aside, I read *House of Leaves* back in 2004, and I haven't really looked at it since, but I remembered almost exactly where that passage was in the text with no marginal notes to guide me.

themselves at odds with their existence; look at the prevalence of counter-culture books like *No-Logo*, *Adbusters*, etc. We want to get away from being consumers, but at the same time, we're always trying to stay (or become) cool. This sort of vicious cycle eventually creates a moment of existential angst in everyone—are we tools for prescribing to the conformity that society hands to us? How can we truly be individuals in a landscape dominated by corporations and brands? Philosophical elements like those used in Rod's fiction, and by others like Tim O'Brien (undermining "Truth"), Graham Swift and Penelope Lively (undermining Objectivity), offer jumping points for similarly struggling readers. While Television can offer similar situations and struggles, the fast-paced movement of television doesn't allow its audience to fully absorb as deeply as they can through reading. Words have concreteness that images do not. Try explaining a complex scene from a recent show you saw on TV—try explaining the last episode of *Six Feet Under*. I guarantee that no one will be able to pull of the emotional power of that ending in a recap. But with a book, with text, a passage can be memorized, recited, or shown, and with it, that passage carries *everything*. For example, Sameha Farag (also published in this issue; her story starts on page 83) recently posted one such passage that moved her greatly in a blog post:

The past few months have been hard on my faith. Seemed like one day I looked around at the world and couldn't comprehend anymore that a God could exist, or that there could possibly be an underlying order or meaning in the chaos of my life, let alone other people's. In a split second, just like that, my faith suddenly made no sense. I had a longing for God, but felt I'd lost him. I became truly afraid of death as I realized, for maybe the first time in my life, that I didn't know for certain what, if anything, might lie on the other side.

Then tonight I read this passage, in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*:

For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing — the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries.

Maybe those words mean nothing to you. That's ok. They mean something to me, though. I can't really explain but somehow, after reading them, and in spite of all the doubts and fears that still won't be fully assuaged, I'm comforted. Somehow, even if just for a split second, God makes sense again. And in that split second, there's always hope. For what? I'm honestly not sure right now. But I'll hold onto it anyway, just the same. (Frag)

This is exactly the type of linguistic/philosophical power that we should be driving to produce. This type of writing works on us in ways that other types of media cannot. In his essay, "Finding a Form," William H. Gass touches on how language is so central to enlightenment:

Language, unlike any other medium, I think, is the very instrument and organ of the mind. It is not the representation of thought, as Plato believed, and hence

only an inadequate copy; but it is thought itself. Certainly we can picture things to ourselves, but we picture them in order to consider their features, to analyze them, judge their qualities. Even the painter talks to himself as he plans his vacation, he does not draw to himself; the lover speaks of his desire, he does not draw his penis on the bedsheets; even the musician says things to the grocer, he does not hum....Words may refer to the world (though any finger can point to Paris), but words are also what we think with when we point our finger at Paris and say, "Paris." Literature is mostly made of mind; and unless that is understood about it, little is understood about it. (36)

In his celebration of language's power, Gass makes a very stunning point. Because language is "an organ of the mind," and because it's something we all share innately, Literature (which is solely made of language) has the power to drive deeper than other forms of media. Gass shows this in his examples of the painter, lover, and musician—in all instances these experts cannot demonstrate their expertise and function alone with it without the incorporation of language. Perhaps this strength of language and its purity lends partially to the connection Grace felt in her blog entry.

All about Character

Another thing you'll hear a lot around the MFA scene is the whole business of focusing on character rather than plot. Plot the tried and true flow-master of genre fiction fails us in the literary realm. Look only to William H. Gass' thoughts for some insight on this:

[Plot] It's a terrible word in English, unless one is thinking of some second-rate conspiracy, a meaning it serves very well. Otherwise, it stands for an error for which there's no longer an excuse. There's bird drop, horse plop, and novel

plot. Story is what can be taken out of the fiction and made into a movie. Story is what you tell people when they embarrass you by asking what your novel is about. Story is what you do to clean up life and make God into a good burgher who manages the world like a business. History is often written as a story so that it can seem to have a purpose, to be on its way somewhere, because stories deny that life is no more than an endlessly muddled middle; they beg each length of it to have a beginning and end like a ballgame or a banquet. Stories are sneaky justifications. You can buy stories at the store, where they are a dime a dozen. Stories are interesting only when they are floors in buildings. Stories are a bore. What one wants to do with stories is screw them up. Stories ought to be in pictures. They're wonderful to see. (45-6)

Notice the relationship Gass draws between plot and imagery—indeed stories always make for great movies, and since that is the case, the story (as in the plotted story), to me, doesn't have the driving power to push literature into whatever new age we're moving towards. If something so easily can shift mediums and lose little to nothing, then I fail to see how it could drive *any* medium let alone the one from which it originated. And through this analysis of plot, we see the final major answer to the “so what” question. Plot makes our work too clean, too implausible. And while you can't dispense of plot completely; we can, through character-driven story maximize what makes literature strong: dense language, philosophical depth, and attention to audience.

Outro – Where to and other thoughts

Literary fiction, as I see it is in a precarious state. Looking on Duotrope.com in the last year they logged 43,925 fiction submissions. Of that 80.1% were rejected with only 8.1%

accepted (with the remaining split between non-responses, author withdrawals, and rewrite requests) (“Overall Statistics”). These are staggering numbers, and they show that 1. a lot of people are writing 2. very few of them are getting published. Furthermore, when looking at the submission type whenever users enter search data, 28.5% the search was set to “Literary” as genre; this is the highest ranking search in the genre category (“Search Statistics”). While many claim that genre fiction sells better than literary, at least on Duotrope.com, literary fiction is the dominant genre sought out for publication. Furthermore, looking at the statistics found on “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” page, Duotrope lists the following top level journals as “most challenging” (as in, lowest acceptance rates): *Glimmertrain*, *Narrative*, *Mid-American Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *McSweeney's*, and *Shenandoah* (with *McSweeney's* being the best at 1.3% acceptance rate, and *Glimmertrain* the worst at 0.5% acceptance). It's interesting to note that no magazines catering to literary fiction grace either the “Approachable” (most acceptances) category or the “Swift” (fastest response times) Category. And while anyone who has attempted to publish a story, will say, “well duh,” does it not seem starkly wrong that sometimes we will wait YEARS for a response (my personal longest was a year and a half from *The Louisville Review*—the magazine published out of my own graduate school). And while anyone involved with writing fiction invariably sometime gets to read some of a slush pile to a magazine, it isn't hard to see why acceptance rates are so low; simply there is a lot of crap flowing around.

However, there *has* to be a better way, for everyone, to deal with the publishing industry. And certainly the industry's state isn't wholly the writers' faults. Most prestigious journals are prestigious because they pay for stories. They can only pay if they have subscriptions/advertisements/contests funding the journal. Short story readership isn't exactly

a hot market item. How often do we hear of publishers asking authors of short story collections if they plan on producing a novel next? Lots of publishers won't even take a short story collection unless there's a novel involved eventually. Short story collections don't sell. And since Barnes & Noble and Borders own most of the book market, the short story medium is under increasing pressure to either suck up and do something right, or please go away and never return.

I've spent a lot of time in this essay discussing craft elements that can spark up the power of short fiction; but there's also some requirement on the side of publishers as well. As a writer of postmodern fiction, I'm always surfing for markets that cater to "experimental" fiction. I've found that increasingly, though lots of journals (including several big name journals) list that they publish it, I rarely, if ever see anything even remotely experimental between their covers. In fact, over the last year or so, the only journal I've seen that really embraces experimental endeavors is *A cappella Zoo*. Perhaps I'm a little biased, as they published a story of mine, but upon reading Issue 2, I see more of the same dedication to literature that's really pushing the envelope. A lot of folks may also think of *McSweeney's* as another channel, but really after reading several issues, aside from a Wells Tower story, I was left overall unimpressed; *McSweeney's* seems to be more about the gimmick of what-will-our-journal-look-like-next-time, than any sort of force driving new literary movement. I see a lot of the same silly, odd humored fiction that's a lot like what Eggers writes, but it's not any more edgy than say, *Opium* or *WordRiot*.

So what do we do? Faced with a market that doesn't directly cater to anything except mainstream—which is bland, we as writers of short fiction should start thinking of other ways, other channels. Small journals like *A cappella Zoo* are a good outlet, but they don't pay

beyond contributor copies/subscriptions, so how can we try to make a semblance of a living off our writing?⁷

Punk Capitalism might be one answer. In his book *The Pirate's Dilemma*, Matt Mason argues that piracy, and specifically media piracy, is driving the new shape of capitalism today. In a world surrounded increasingly with intangible intellectual property, many of us have an increasingly difficult time agreeing to the idea of ownership pertaining to such intangible property. Look only to the music industry. Since the advent of mp3 technology in the late 1990s, everyone and their grandmother has downloaded or traded music in one form or another, and very few of us feel bad about it. While the MPAA and RIAA gnash teeth against this wave of media piracy, trying to compare it to stealing a physical DVD or CD from Wal-Mart, we find it hard to truly see the comparison because data is insubstantial—you can't see, touch, feel, or smell it, and therefore, it's very easy to say that downloading the latest Metallica CD is not illegal because there's no physical product missing. This, of course, is the dilemma of the digital age; how can copyright laws written in the 19th century hold up against such intangible items of intellectual property? Furthermore, as bookreaders like the Kindle move closer to becoming mainstream items, the idea of digitizing our fiction becomes more and more of a reality. And as such, how should we control and maintain our own intellectual property?

The point is though that since most of us aren't making money on our stories, why spend so much time waiting around for some journal to take a year and a half to publish your story? Why not publish it yourself? Here in the Web 2.0 age, you need no formal

⁷ When I think about it, writing has to be singularly the most work intensive endeavor with the lowest possible return. Thus far I've published 8 stories, and my only earnings came from contest wins, of which, most of that money ended up being re-invested into more contests. Furthermore, an individual story will take me hundreds of hours to complete. Fortunately, I'm not a capitalist, so the notion of killing myself for enjoying to do something that makes negative profit isn't flashing across my headspace.

programming skill to throw together a wonderful site that can host everything you own. And if you have an inkling of marketing skill, you can employ Google AdSense, and other forms of advertisement to make money for your fiction. Or you can take a page from bands like Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, Madonna, and Oasis, give the big publishing houses the finger and go out on your own completely—self publish to PDF and set up a tip-jar where readers pay as little or as much as they want for your content. While these are all fantastic ideas, there are two primary shows-stopping problems to this sort of distribution: 1. self-publishing is thoroughly scoffed upon by the literary community as amateurish and vain. 2. Unknown authors will have difficulty developing readership. However, *House of Leaves*, prior to publication, started out circulating the Internet. So it's definitely possible, ballsy as all hell, but isn't that what the punk movement is all about? "Here's one chord, now here's two more, now form your own band" (Mason 14).

The whole Idea I'm advocating here, and seriously starting to consider myself, is that traditional publishing for short fiction is a dying form, but people still want to read it; the Internet, with its ease of use and explosion of self expression – see the blogosphere for more – leaves us with a great opening to really drive something new. In many ways, *Ontologica* follows the punk-capitalist endeavor. While editors, Rod, Dave, and I are also contributors. And though many will scoff at our notion of publishing our own writing in our own magazine, at the same time it's the perfect venue for what we want to relay. Overall we're looking to create a cohesive voice with *Ontologica*, one that interrogates the position of the status quo, and what better way to do it than to break the rules?

~~The end~~ The Beginning

Fiction isn't dying, nor is it going anywhere. Publishing houses are going bankrupt

looking for the next big star, and right now, that star is Reif Larsen. But for the rest of us, out of the limelight, in the trenches, writing the good write, we need to stand up, band together, and start driving literary fiction somewhere meaningful. Contemporary Realism isn't doing that for us; for as enjoyable as it can be to read, it's stagnating readers and magazines alike. Anti-establishmentary practices, your postmodern screwity, and metafictional headtrips will get some attention, but deep down, it's the language and form and content that will drive the change. While postmodernists old and new will get the masses to start thinking outside the box, it's up to the true visionaries, Ben Marcus', Wells Towers', Steven Hall's, Jesse Ball's, Aimee Bender's, and you to take literature farther into new uncharted territory.

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A Review of Out of My Skin A Novel By John Haskell

John Haskell's novel *Out of My Skin* is a curious work of fiction. The story centers around a writer recently transplanted to Los Angeles, a man seemingly uncertain about the fate and purpose of his identity. This isn't a novel necessarily about the machinations of Hollywood though this particular locale does help suffuse the setting with a cast of characters patently unable to define themselves or their place within the cosmos at large.

Near the beginning of the book the narrator arrives in California and starts work on a story for the LA Times about a Steve Martin impersonator. The two meet around the same time the narrator also meets, and subsequently falls in love with, a woman named Jane. Simple enough. Until the narrator begins to act out his own attempted impersonation of Steve Martin, soon preferring the ways this fabricated variant of himself acts and behaves around Jane. She, of course, never realizes he's acting like someone else.

The word *novel* doesn't really apply here, which might be the point. Thinking about what most people consider to be normal traits of a novel can, in this case, raise questions about those very traits. Much as with our own established ideas about what makes an identity. Luckily, the author and his narrator aren't terribly worried about sussing out definitive answers, preferring the questions instead, as if the act of exploring these ideas is more rewarding than providing any solutions.

Haskell is expert at painting opaque scenes that resonate and give his work an

enjoyable tone front to back. Be it the opening pages with the narrator recalling time spent in a shark cage surrounded by chum and blood, or a scene that finds him swinging by his foot from a rope out over Laurel Canyon, there is an overriding sense of performance to this writing. These vignettes compile and unwind effortlessly into a mood that captures the protagonist's eventual loss of identity, thrust headlong into his pursuit of behaving as if he were, in fact, another person (thus the book's title).

In getting back to the idea of this book as a series of scenes or vignettes, more akin to moments than stories: It is a testament to Haskell's talent that each one is entirely satisfying and supportive of the book as a whole. There's plenty here to admire and Haskell maintains a solid measure of narrative propulsion without succumbing to familiar storylines. It's a display of artistry that's more to do with casting around, albeit sometimes wildly, for an elusive truth than any kind of subservience to traditional ideas or how novels typically work on the minds of readers. It's a lot of fun. You may come away from this short book unable to nail down what it's all about, but you'll easily remember how it feels.

Disclosures of Cloud Movement at 2:06 in the Afternoon 2

It was no thing imagined, as there are rules or balances outside it, ourselves,
that account for the swirl of its gray over us, into wisp-sweeps of immense
whitening and, below, those more somber tongues licking downward, descending in
deepening gradations of black, the whole of it roiling as sea or one fabric,

a scarf over the city billowing irregularly, as if an intelligence compromised
by a mixture of moods running the gamut, as if bipolar states in a simultaneity
of presence, at once warring then in a turn complementary, leaving
the outcome of the commotion pending, withholding its denouement

for some time or moment that pleases itself, and all the more for the way
it injects into the scene by this mixed state of supreme clarity (colors
shot forward like adjectives new born at the beginning of time) and quick fadings
(of both colors and shapes, here, on this curved plane, leaving ghost outlines

of things in the near distance) the caught trip-point of our unknowing, our
strained curiosity that, beyond the question of umbrellas, so aches for resolution.
Yet, here, on this dock, outside the bindery, your small tanzanite pendant shown
like the truest north, the bluest of freedom as, in that moment, we dissolved,
bodies and selves, into a brief vagueness, a translucent oneness, unbound.

Fry's exploration of social networking sites like Facebook reaches a conclusion that is ultimately ambivalent. While recognizing the dangers of online networking—facelessness, self-absorption, mile-wide relationships that are an inch deep—he is hopeful that we can overcome these issues and utilize the Internet's potential. - RD

Cameron Fry

Has Facebook Made Us Faceless?

My new Facebook status: *Cameron Fry is wondering if this is what communication is has turned into, giving the world minute-by-minute updates on what I'm doing through a website.* Have we really stooped to the level where we would rather connect to the individuals we love through fiber optic wiring, cables, and computer screens? The art of face-to-face communication is slowly dying. Is this something that should be mourned, or should it be praised as human evolution through the advanced use of technology? In my personal opinion, the absence of face-to-face communication would be one of the greatest losses to humanity.

I understand that technology still allows us to have “face-to-face” communication through devices like webcams, but it's not at all the same. We're tethered to an electronic device. We can't study the nonverbal signals of the entire body. Most of what a person says is conveyed through their nonverbal actions. Not only the entire view of the person would be lost, but the experience in various environments is absent as well. It's through stimuli that humans react, and our environments provide that. Sitting at my office desk staring at a screen of someone doing the same thing doesn't give me that connection of actually being with a person.

Think about the actual feeling of being with someone, too. There's an energy that can be felt from the other person that pixels can't convey. You can touch the person, feel the

warmth of their skin, smell the cologne or perfume they are wearing, and even share a kiss. By isolating ourselves from each other, we are denying ourselves our given senses, the things that truly make us human. We wouldn't be utilizing our full potential if we stripped ourselves of the very resources we have that allow us to take in life to the utmost extent.

This process of slowly isolating ourselves to be more connected to those around us has been a gradual one, but in the past decade, it has exponentially accelerated. Technologies came out such as MySpace, Facebook, and XBOX Live where a person didn't even have to leave his/her living room to have a "social" experience.

These new forms of social networking aren't becoming just an option anymore. The minority used to be people who were members of these sites and services, but those roles have drastically reversed in the past few years. According to Facebook's statistic page, there are more than 200 million active Facebook users in the world, and over half of them log in everyday. It's not just kids either. The website also goes on to state that the fastest growing demographic on Facebook is users over the age of thirty-five. That's right! Adults are becoming more active on this site than kids are.

It's not just a healthy pastime anymore either. A study done by Aryn Karpinski, a researcher in the education department at Ohio State University questioned 219 US undergraduates and graduates about their use of Facebook. It was found that 65% of Facebook users accessed their accounts daily, usually checking several times a day to see if they received new messages. The report went on to show that students who used Facebook had a significantly lower grade point average. Karpinski was quoted saying, "It is the equivalent of the difference between getting an A and a B," ("Times Online").

If this sort of technology is hurting us and holding us back, why are we so addicted to it? But then again, maybe that's exactly what it is: an addiction. These sorts of sites are just

like any drug. Originally we only try them because of peer pressure or because “everyone else is doing it,” but then we crave the rush more often. Whether it’s getting that fix with a needle or a mouse, we crave for it more and more. The rush of taking a hit or getting that wall post from the cute girl at that party last night. All of it, intoxicating. Looking back, that’s exactly how I started. Other friends convinced me that it was fun and cool. Now, like any other addicts, we can’t picture our lives without this drug.

Unfortunately, to stay in the loop culturally, it’s almost necessary to be a part of this expanding technology. We’re being forced into this technological solitude, and as a society, we do not comprehend what we’re doing to ourselves. The connection between humans is one of the greatest gifts we have. The ability to speak to, touch, hear, and see one another is something very special. That medium can’t be replaced with a keyboard and microphone.

I was at the movie theater the other day, and I witnessed a couple two rows ahead of me. You could tell they were still getting to know each other and this was one of their first dates. Thinking that the pre-movie period would be the perfect time to get to know a date, I was surprised to see that neither of them spoke to one another that much. For a solid ten to fifteen minutes both of them were mostly on their phone texting. The most surprising part is that they were texting each other while they were sitting less than six inches apart. I knew this because one would check their phone, giggle and look at the person next to them, and immediately retreat back to his/her phone. This process repeated itself with both of them. We’re dating over cell phones now! Don’t get me wrong, a nagging girlfriend would be much easier on the ears via text messages, but that’s not the point. Texting within two feet is a little extreme.

As a culture, this proves the fact that we have grown to be so incredibly self-conscious and vulnerable, we have to hide behind the veil of QWERTY keyboards and touch screens to

build relationships with our peers. We've been cursed with the opportunity to say what we want to say as faceless phone numbers and screen names. We now have the ability to say whatever we want without having to see the moral impact of our actions in the eyes of our recipient. This noxious potential is something that can do more harm than good.

Growing up, my parents always taught me to be outgoing and not to be afraid of talking to people of any age. Apparently that skill they passed on to me is a rare one for someone of my age. Throughout my life I have noticed that a majority of people have a sheer fear of dealing with others. It's as if we are all from our own planet, and the thought of expanding outward is too difficult and uncomfortable to even fathom. That's why these social networking sites are so popular. They provide a wall between the users and the rest of the world. It's an electronic comfort zone.

I feel as if I'm ranting and degrading all of this new technology, and if that was what I was doing, I'm a hypocrite. I use or have used all of the technology I've discussed. The way I look at this technology, however, is that it's a way for me to expand my social circle. I supplement my social networking with sites such as Facebook or services like XBOX Live.

For example, I met someone from Massachusetts who moved to Japan over XBOX Live. When he came back to the States for a visit, I was fortunate enough to meet him in person. We've been friends for over five years now, and if it weren't for technology such as XBOX Live, I would have never met him.

XBOX Live is a whole different technology all together when it comes to the world of Internet networking. With other sites such as MySpace and Facebook, complete strangers can at least see what you look like and get general information about you. However, XBOX Live gaming is only consisted of voice chat and online video games. You know nothing more of the person marching next to you other than the sound of their voice and their weapon

preference when fighting aliens. Yet somehow, people are still able to build close relationships through this medium. It's nothing short of a phenomenon. I believe it has something to do with the fact that you are trying to accomplish a common goal with your online teammates that you learn to work together. As ridiculous as it sounds, your survival depends on your fellow gamers.

People play video games to escape their reality and join another. When in this alternate reality, the players are drawn in and play the role of the character in the game. At that moment, success is their only goal. People don't play video games to fail. That's why I think this bonding is so logical and common because no matter who you are, you already have something in common with a complete stranger. Everyone knows that people get along better when they have more things in common with each other.

Again, though, we're using this technology to escape our own physical world. We are choosing to leave our own reality and live in a fictional one with complete strangers.

People don't look at these technologies as a way of enhancing their physical social life. Instead of using it to engage in and build face-to-face interactions, they use it as a substitute. That's denying everything we are as humans. Humans need interaction to survive. In the past, it has proven that newborn infants can actually die if they aren't given enough love and attention in the early stages of life. This same sort of craving for attention also occurs in people of all ages. According to WebMD, there is a psychological disorder by the name of Munchausen Syndrome in which the patient makes up fictitious symptoms for him/herself just to acquire the attention and interaction that ill patients receive. It mostly occurs in young adults, but the age range that the illness can occur in is limitless.

What does all this mean, though? What does technology have to do with any of this? Technology is not to blame here. It's just a player in the game that we clearly have not yet

learned to control or understand. As humans, we need to realize that only so much can be accomplished using our digital identities. To change the world, we have to go out and change it. That means stepping out of our comfort zones and dealing with people of all different descents and cultures. We've been sitting in our computer chairs for far too long thinking that our significance on Earth was becoming greater as the number of our friends on MySpace increased. Technology is a nice side dish to the entrée that is humanity. However, it's no New York Strip. Our role as a human is the most important one that we play, not some identity on the Internet

The fact of the matter is simple: we are a society that has been trained to believe we are never good enough. We aren't attractive if we don't wear the right clothes, we can't get members of the opposite sex without smelling a certain way. The Internet is our vaccine to the pandemic that is low self-esteem. It allows us to be whatever we want to be without any repercussions. If you live in Maine, no one in California could accuse you of lying on your profile by saying you're 6'5" with a chiseled hard six pack. They don't know any better.

We have gotten so addicted to the Internet because it allows us to be who we want to be. It's the sandpaper to the roughness around our edges. As comforting as it is to know people like your digital identity, it's not and never will be you. Your digital identity will not travel the world and see all it has to offer. Your digital identity won't ever feel the skin of its true soul mate. Your digital identity won't ever live. However, you will. I think we need to cut the cords and live life the way it was intended through our very own eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and nose.

Technology can be used for great things. We just need to remind ourselves from time to time that without us the technology would be useless. So go out there and get to know the people who make that technology important.

Facebook status update: *Cameron Fry is alive and hopeful for the future.*

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Mosaic

You are making a mosaic, abstract
in muted shades of moss, foam, and fog.
Clay shapes you have made and fired, affixed
to the surface you are patterning with shattered
glass, piece by piece: slow work. Our daughter stands
on tiptoe and traces a spiral, still
smooth, red ochre, with one finger. *That's Daddy's*,
I tell her, and she looks up, pleased and
serious, and I think of our first glimpse
of her, the grainy sonogram, the only
clear things one white, spread-fingered hand
and the dark shape of her lips, a feminine
miniature of your mouth. Someone called it
a rosebud, and it was a bloom, a bow,

a small, imperfect boat. For months after
she began crawling, you abandoned art,
fearing glass shards and the lure of small, bright
tiles to a toddler mouthing everything.
I have seen your blood mix with the grout pressed
into jagged patterns and known why you
can't resist touching, even in museums,
tracing stone curves or running a thumb
over ridges of thick oil, and I know
that's part of my love for you, your bold need
to understand, your willingness to bleed.
The clay spiral under our daughter's finger
winds space into a second curve, the way
my love for each of you cradles the other.

PASSPORTS

We had them expedited to be sure.
We were going to teach English.

When I am alone

sometimes I open our fire-proof
box

and look at our passports, set them
on the sofa,

and think about living in Korea. The week

we had our photos
taken, we went to Wal-Mart

to find the Photo Department under
construction.

I carried the envelope with my identity:
the orphan photo, the legalese,

the Naturalization papers, names
of strangers.

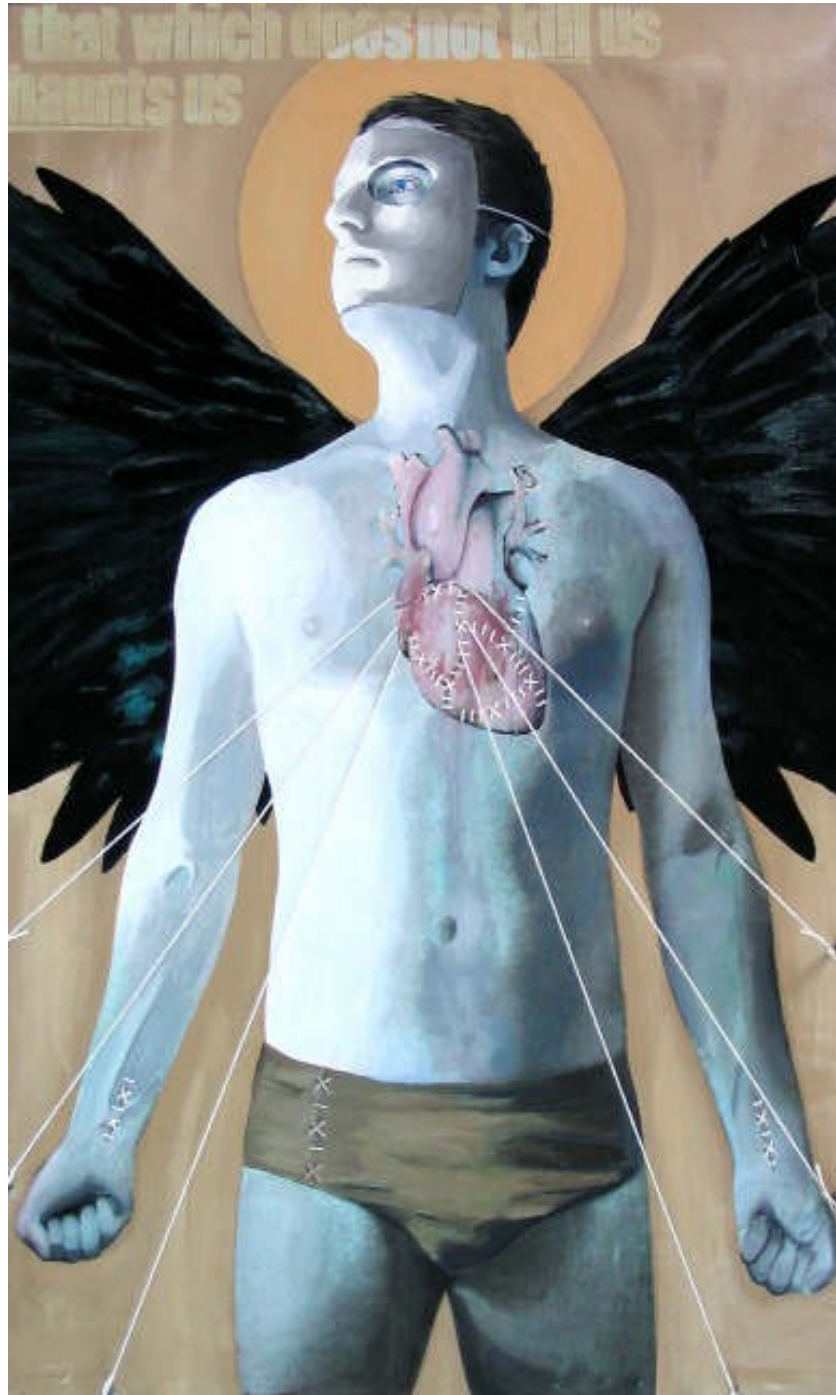
A photocopied ghost once,

I saw my passport photo drying

and let go.

Dennis Waddell

"That Which Doesn't Kill Us." Acrylic on canvas.



"Black wings create a darker inference than white wings. This was probably best for a statement about the soul's ability to rise from the ashes of emotional and depression and burnt out relationships, without being completely healed...Halos are also present in most of my work. Historically they have been used in art to note figures of spiritual importance, but I use them excessively to show that everyone is of spiritual importance."

After Hearing Neruda, My Young Daughter Asks for a Poem about Mangos

For my daughter, I would write like Neruda,
his poem lighting the cathedral of the lemon,
praising its secret chambers, its sting.
But here I am lacking in skill and subject.
The mango has no chambers and is all sweetness,
all heavy and smooth till I break the skin,
smooth and heavy like an organ of the body,
smell thick and sweet as adolescence
(the boy at the fruit stand, his blonde hair falling,
the sweat on his wrists, the hot, sweet smell
of mango and pineapple in the Florida sun).

I write: *O Mango, weight measured in the hand
like an organ lifted free of the body's cathedral.
O Mango, you are a basilica of sweetness.*

What does mango taste like? Like a carrot
crossed with a peach, my mother said, reaching
for a familiar flavor, renaming the exotic.
That's not what mango tastes like, but I think of it
every time: my mother pulling the knife
to her thumb again and again, sharing the fruit
between us, piece by piece—one for Amy,
one for Cye, one for Stacey, one for Mistie.
We took turns scraping the flesh from the pit,
sucking the thick syrup from the fibrous center.
Even my mother took her turn, never wasting, taking
all that she could get, the bit of fruit scraped
from a strip of skin with her bottom teeth,
(the juice on her chin, the pulp between her fingers).
The last piece she ate off the knife blade.

I write: *O Mango, mother-fruit, the orange
and deep yellow of life, its overabundance and want.*

I should say, *The heart is a mango beneath your breast.*
I should say, *I felt fear in the mango pit of my stomach.*

*In the center of my body and being, beneath the sweet,
pulpy mess of existence, I felt an oblong hardness.*

I write: O Mango, you will never be enough.

Tinnitus

Identifying it at last as both a persistent high-B ringing in my left ear
and also a phantom sound that the brain—or maybe mind—makes
in its insistence to be heard like a thread woven through setting
and cloud-cover tapestries of the everyday subtly flashing only as points

of light, platinum or gold (as if of a singular lighthouse on some abandoned
coast, eastern perhaps, important—no, necessary—in its day, giving
both reference to destination and illumination of rocky hazards jutting
up out of the otherwise smooth onyx covering the night sea-skin is,

so that they—the early-morning crowds gathered thick as piranhas at pier's end
—could get their next installments of Boz's addictive invented realities
straight from the holds of the tall-masted ships that had trekked like gentle giants
over the whale-road, their white scarves billowing in the breeze of the bay,

at last, as the one high-turning light choreographed the last sweep of their
long arrival and settled them), I sensed it as core or something of core matter,
that, if grasp-able, could inform us, illumine the dangerous darkening bay that
is ours, is everyone's, here: all waiting, as if for a poem or an apology to begin,
depend, from that x-axis of rotating light, that steady high contrapuntal tone.

Susane Lackovic



"Plasma Wind Goddess." Digital print shot on Fuji Finepix

"The content of this sculpture addresses the decomposition of humanity, but on another more adaptable level. How we deal with the "idea" of what garbage is and what it can become. The phrase "going green" and "carbon footprint" is thrown around a lot now a days. We strive to cut down on what we use now. We don't love our trash like we should. Our trash defines us and is our new religion."

Sameha Farag's "The Magrittean Hours," like all work in the experimental vein stands at a sort of precipice of the fictive form. While at times this peak may be too far in the clouds or too steep to scale, Sameha balances her experimentation with an attention to razor sharp imagery and humor to keep the reader grounded in the story. And like a clock (even if this one's broken), each piece drives the next and the next, building each seemingly fragmentary vignette into a compelling whole. - *DL*

Sameha Farag

The Magrittean Hours

I.

Once there was a man who was king of the world. This may or may not be his story.

II.

Picture a moment: Gray sky, slick streets. Trembling reflections of red, green, and yellow lights caught in dark puddles. Cars suddenly arrested in their headlong rush to God knows where. Raindrops hang in midair like glittering silver baubles, each one containing its own miniature of the world.

On a corner, a woman bends sideways holding an umbrella in one hand as with the other she reaches toward her heel to scratch an eternal itch. Two men watch her from inside a car halted at the infinite intersection. One of them thinks he would like to kiss her. The other wants to push her hard against the wall at her back and fuck her til she splits, shatters and dissolves, lost in the crumbling mortar lines between each stained brick.

Steel, glass, concrete, and silence fill up the space between them.

In this moment, the light is always red, so there they stay.

III.

One afternoon, woman named Jade met her friend Susan for lunch at Mani's, a "Best-of-L.A." joint on Fairfax. On most afternoons, the café was full of healthy, attractive people with trendy tears in their jeans. The men liked to sport stubbled facial hair, and the women liked to wear their hair loose and long.

Susan's hair was loose and long. Jade's was short; she had gotten it cut that morning and every now and then she turned her head quickly, to feel the soft ends brush against her cheeks. Susan became a vegetarian last week, so she ordered the vegetarian chili. Jade asked for the BBQ chicken wrap. Susan frowned.

"You know what they do to chickens, don't you," she said. "Horrible. Inhumane."

"Chickens aren't human," Jade said. Susan changed the subject.

"So how come Sean didn't come with us to the museum today?"

Jade picked up her paper napkin and took her time unfolding it before spreading it on her lap.

Jade suspects Sean of cheating on her with another woman. She believes he is planning a rendezvous. This afternoon, in fact. She does not want to tell Susan, because she doesn't like the way Susan always asks about Sean when he isn't around. Before she answers, she takes a long sip of water, wishing it were the iced passion fruit tea.

"He had an accident," Jade said. "Snowboarding last weekend. Broke both legs."

"Oh my God," Susan said.

"Refills on water?" said a waitress.

"Yes please," Jade said.

"Thanks," said Susan. "And could you bring some lemon, please?" The waitress filled their glasses and left. Susan looked at Jade.

"Is he all right? Where is he now?"

Jade kicks herself mentally for not forestalling the inevitable follow-up questions.

"Well," Jade said. "He... went to a specialist. In Austria."

"Austria? What kind of specialist?"

Damn Susan, thinks Jade.

"A really renowned specialist in broken bones."

"What's his name?"

"It's a she," Jade said. "I don't recall."

Susan said nothing.

Jade traced a line of condensation down the side of her glass. "He was cruising under the lift, when someone's ski fell off and almost hit him. Sent him off the trail into the trees, and BAM, his board dug into a snowdrift and his legs snapped as he faceplanted in deep powder. Just snapped."

"No," said Susan.

"He was worried that he'd heal badly and be unable to walk someday. He didn't want to take any chances."

"Hence the specialist in Germany."

"Right." Jade scrunched her eyebrows together, remembering. "No. Austria."

"Right," said Susan.

Susan knows that Jade is lying, not least because Susan slept with Sean only two days ago, on his lunch break. She wonders if Jade suspects anything, and if her suspicion is the reason for this outrageous story. She takes a long sip of her water and wishes it were scotch.

"I asked for lemon," Susan said, shaking her glass. "The waitress must've forgot." She

paused. "Sorry to hear about Sean. That's terrible."

Jade shrugged. "That's life."

IV.

Far away, in a hot, barren land, a snake slithers across the golden sands of a desert, leaving behind a winding trail filled with shadows.

V.

About a mile from Mani's, east on Beverly Blvd., a man named Michael spends his nights sitting upright on a bench at a bus stop, his back to passing cars as he leans his head against the wall of the small shelter. He dreams next to a movie poster in which a woman's face is half-hidden by her sultry windblown hair, and her lips are scarlet.

Michael is no angel, arch or otherwise. He is a huge mound of a man, who might in another life be amused by the fact that every day there is a woman who drives by and worries about him because she always passes at the same time in the morning and he is always in the same position as he sleeps with his head buried under a flannel shirt to block out the onslaught of sunlight. She can't tell if he is alive or dead.

But of course, he does not know about the woman, who lives alone and has not been on an airplane, not once, in all her 33 years. She wants a lover. Instead, she has a cat named Charlie, a fish named Fred and a therapist named Dr. Leo. That is not his name, but she likes to call him Dr. Leo because of his blond hair that drifts in long waves down to his shoulders.

Dr. Leo says she should have a goal in life. She says her goal is to think of a really good goal. Well, says Dr. Leo, it's a start I guess.

VI.

Susan finished her vegetarian chili faster than Jade finished her wrap, so she had no choice but to watch Jade keep eating. A man approached their table. "Excuse me," he said, smiling at Susan. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't know," she said. "You'll have to ask my agent."

Susan did not have an agent. While she also pretended to not have a phone so she wouldn't have to give her number to the man, Jade thought about Sean. She did not know how she felt about his cheating and this worried her.

She took another bite of her wrap and glanced out the window in time to see a gargantuan man in a dirty coat pass by outside the window. He appeared to be talking to himself, and he was pushing a shopping cart filled to overflowing with dirty clothing. Jade started to feel sorry for him, glad for the distraction from feeling numb about Sean, until she noticed the blinking Bluetooth headset clipped to his ear.

"I thought you were in my film class two semesters ago," Jade heard the man at their table say. She glanced at him, and then at Susan who shook her head.

"I hate films," she said. "Just look what they do to chickens. I mean, people."

The man stared and Jade laughed.

VII.

They say the universe abhors a vacuum. One might wonder why the universe doesn't hire a maid.

VIII.

Susan talked as she finished up the last crumbs of a vegan shortbread cookie that had been dipped in barley chocolate. She said something about the world not making sense anymore.

“There’s a homeless man on a cell phone outside,” Jade observed. “And he’s smoking a pipe.”

“You aren’t listening to me,” Susan said.

“Aren’t I?” Jade said.

Susan drank her after-lunch tea in a large gulp. Then she looked at her watch. “We have to go,” she said. “I, uh, am really going to be late for this thing I have to do.”

Jade remembers sitting on the couch with Sean the night before as she channel-surfs between infomercials and tells her he has to go in to the office tomorrow afternoon. She doesn’t remind him about their plans to go to Santa Monica for a sunset walk on the pier and then dinner on the Promenade. She keeps looking at the TV, switching channels. Sean kisses her cheek. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Looks like it’ll be a late night.” Jade asks if she should bring dinner over, keep him company. He says not to worry about it. “The boss is treating us as compensation for ruining our weekends. Oh, and don’t wait up.”

Jade paused, looking at Susan.

“What thing?” she asked.

“A friend,” says Susan. “I have this friend who’s moving. I said I’d help.”

“It’s almost four. Why are they moving so late in the day?”

Damn Jade, thinks Susan.

“Well, actually he, I mean she’s not moving today, she’s just packing, but you know what a job that is. She’s moving next week.”

“Well,” said Jade, “we’d better go then. I wouldn’t want you to be late on my account.”

IX.

One day, the sun’s warmth at last begins to penetrate the many layers under which

Michael sleeps. He wakes slowly, his limbs stiff from sitting for hours on the shelter bench. Gathering his belongings, he leaves the bus shelter, pushing his shopping cart and the leaning tower inside it to the corner of Beverly and Fairfax. On the other side of the intersection, his friend Jorge sells cigarettes, Tupperware, and, occasionally, cell phones, his merchandise spread along a cement wall. Jorge gives him a couple Marlboros for free, and Michael talks to him about the interpretation of dreams, because Michael has been having strange dreams lately. Michael says, "There was a train, and a clock, and an empty room," and Jorge hears something like, "Dhairza tray nda klok nda nemtee rum." But he nods and says, "Hola, señor, buenos dias," as he smiles, showing the wide space between his front teeth, and the one gleaming golden canine protruding from a blackened gum on the top left side of his mouth.

Michael doesn't realize that Jorge does not understand him, but it doesn't matter. He is pleased enough with the gifts of the cigarette and Jorge's gap-toothed grin.

A few blocks away, on the ninth floor of a building that sits on the corner of Wilshire and Fairfax, just a few blocks south of Mani's, the woman Michael knows nothing about is standing on a balcony outside of her office, looking down at the street far below as the wind makes strings out of her long brown hair.

She is thinking that maybe flying would be a pretty good goal. She pulls out her cell phone to call Dr. Leo and tell him.

X.

Always marks the spot. What lies beneath is another question.

XI.

The woman was late for work so when the traffic light at Gardner turned red and

stopped her next to Michael's bus shelter she didn't see Michael, because he had already awakened and left. The woman only saw the bench, surrounded on three sides by key-scarred plexiglass walls, on one of which hung a tattered poster of a woman's half-hidden face. A single boot that probably fell out of Michael's shopping cart lay on its side under the bench. Then the light changed and she had to start driving again.

She arrived at work, and after turning on her computer and staring at it for a few minutes she slid open the glass door to her balcony and stepped outside. Now she stands alone on a small platform high above the sidewalk. The wind is cold and she hugs her arms against her body, shivering. She sees a lady with faded brown hair waiting at the bus stop below, holding a large bunch of yellow flowers. The bus arrives and the lady climbs on, turning her body sideways as she passes through the folding doors so as not to damage the bright bouquet. The woman on the balcony hears the whoosh of airbrakes as the doors close and the bus shifts into gear, pulling away from the curb. She wonders where the lady is taking the flowers. She wonders if they are for or from a lover. She wonders if it makes a difference.

Dr. Leo says that flying is a good goal if she is thinking about, say, Phoenix. Or perhaps San Francisco. Somewhere close. She listens to his voice on the phone, and nods even though she knows he can't see her.

She asks him to take care of Charlie and Fred. He tells her to wait. She says she can't anymore. She says goodbye.

Then she takes a very deep breath, and jumps.

Across the street from the bus shelter on Beverly and Gardner, Michael and Jorge pause between drags on their cigarettes, hearing the looping screams of an ambulance in the distance. But they think nothing of it.

XII.

Outside Mani's, the sun shone and a few puffy clouds drifted in the blue sky. Susan took off her sweater and wrapped it around her waist.

"Who wears a bowler hat on a day like this?" she said. "Or a suit, for that matter."

She pointed to a man walking ahead of them. Jade said he looked dapper.

"Dapper? Dapper?" said Susan. She rolled her eyes.

"It *is* a word, you know," said Jade.

"But what does it mean?"

Jade didn't answer. They arrived at the lot and got in Jade's car. She dropped Susan off at her apartment on the west side, and then pretended to drive away but pulled over a block later. She waited until she saw Susan's silver Scion zip past about half an hour later. She followed Susan to Aroma Café in Studio City, where Sean was sitting at one of the outside tables. She let Susan disappear around the corner and turned on her hazard lights while she sat doubleparked across the street in front of Vitello's and the sign advertising the restaurant's weekly Comedy Night. Jade waited until she saw Susan walk around the corner toward the café, and until she saw Sean get up from his seat and put his arms around Susan, and until she saw them kiss.

Then she drove home.

She walked into the apartment and looked around—at the leather couch and love seat set that she hated and Sean loved, at the large aquarium in which one lone Japanese fighting fish swam listlessly among the bubbles, at the big-screen TV. She stood, taking it all in, and then went into the second bedroom that doubled as Sean's home office. She picked up his laptop containing his entire advertising portfolio and ran her hands over its smooth metallic exterior. Then she threw it out the window. Three floors down, it hit the asphalt. A piece of the

casing chipped off, but otherwise it remained intact. Jade stared at it for awhile. She considered going downstairs and stomping on it, or pounding on it with a heavy blunt object, but she felt so tired. Instead she left the apartment, got back in her car and drove away, the tears in her eyes bending the world into trembling, shapeless blurs. She headed to Santa Monica where she walked alone along the pier, past the creaking Ferris wheel, the spinning carnival rides, the countless couples kissing.

The air began to chill with the onset of evening and a breeze lifted off of the ocean. She reached the end of the pier just as the sun dissolved into a thick red puddle on the horizon. Leaning against the railing, the tears turning to ice on her face, she put her fists in her pockets and gazed across the vast, darkening sea.

XIII.

Picture a moment, wreathed in black and warm as a womb. A woman with an umbrella stands on a street corner in a silver rain, waiting for the storm to pass. Two men inside a car wait for a light to change. Somewhere, a clock's glass face cracks as a train howls forever in the distance.

And here lies the king of the world, sleeping in a bus shelter at a busy intersection, next to the torn poster of a woman with half-parted scarlet lips.

Tooth Fairy

I carry it from her room, the first
lost tooth of our only child.
I carry it to him on my open palm, tiny
and shaped like a chisel, a single drop
of her blood at the root.

What should we do with this bit of bone?
Bury it? Swallow it? Let one body take back
what once was part of both of us?

Face to face in the yellow gloom
of the hall light, like an aging wedding
photo of ourselves, we gaze bemused
and moved at my hand between us,
the chip of bone laid across my life line.

Ours is the tooth, the blood, the humming
breath, her sleeping visage (the reflected
face of all our ancestors).

Ours is the circle of gray carpet outside
her bedroom, the quiet when she has finally
succumbed to sleep. Ours the godlike uncertainty,
the hand that slips beneath the pillow,
that leaves small compensation for what it takes.

A Review of Big World

By Mary Miller

Mary Miller writes short sentences. Her characters are broken. And somewhere in between those two statements is a fully wrought world forever on the brink of heartbreak. There are 11 short stories here, some having appeared in well-known publications and a few others new to print, and it's all bound in a gorgeous little paperback format ala the old Dell pocket books – this cool gem published as a part of the Short Flight/Long Drive series by the most excellent folks at the literary journal Hobart.

In the first story “Leak”, a young girl spends her days confused by her developing body and her relationship to her single-parent father, a bleak situation underscored by the painful absence of her mother. She lives in a world slowly falling apart from all directions, a place where a hole in the kitchen ceiling doesn't go unnoticed but it also doesn't get fixed. Much like his unwillingness to repair this encroaching leak, the father won't communicate to his daughter anything other than the most basic of information. This setup is a good showcase for Miller's deft touch as a practitioner of the short form and how she handles the thoughts of her characters. As a reader you intuitively “get it” without having to open your maw for a runny spoonful of exposition:

“It was just the two of us and things had been difficult since I'd grown breasts, they

came between us. He wouldn't let me sit on his lap anymore."

Sex plays a role in that story, but it's never struck upon as vividly as in others. Most of Miller's people have and want and think about sex. It's a refreshing characteristic to the collection as a whole. As a reader, you get the essence of the moment, be it imagined or real, and the delivery is usually blunt, like this sentence from the title story:

"I barely feel a thing, but I moan because he likes it when I carry on."

There isn't a lot of confusion around that sentence. The confusion comes about from the actions of the narrators, mostly women, once the deed gets done. And nobody here is better off after having sex, although they all seek it out because it seems to be what they know, not what they need.

It's impossible to pick a singular knockout story in this compact arsenal of a collection. It's also hard not to be impressed by the level of craft and care evident in the writing. Yet in the end, it's all in service to Miller's wonderfully damaged characters and their lives. There's much about *Big World* that's capable of rendering you fully dazzled, and plenty hurt.

Jason Lee Miller's "Quantum Fiction" studies the potentiality of a theoretical collision between ontological world-creation and String Theory. In it, Miller takes several forms of postmodern theory and explains them through the eyes of Quantum Physics and String Theory. Ultimately he argues that the act of creating a reality, or fiction, cannot be completely random, but must be influenced somehow by the "tiny quanta that make up the underlying rhythms." Once defined, Miller then applies his interpretation of Quantum Fiction to selections from Edgar Allen Poe, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. - DL

Jason Lee Miller

Quantum Fiction

A Thought Experiment Applying the Concepts of Quantum Physics to Reality Creation Via Prose Rhythm

At the heart of everything is a vibration, and that vibration helps create reality. It is as if the universe hinges on music, or more basic, rhythms. The mathematics of these rhythms form the basis of string theory in quantum physics, which has spooky and nearly unfathomable implications for the nature of reality, of truth, and of the universe. Its discovery changed the way scientists and philosophers saw their world and led to developments as ominous as the atomic bomb and as wonderful as the iPod.

I include philosophers (and by extension, grasping theologians and spiritualists whom critics might call "quantum mystics") because string theory and its successors, one of which is often called a Theory of Everything, inject consciousness into these vibrations, meaning that not only do they seem to *choose* their paths, but their paths are *affected* by conscious observation. The idea that consciousness seems to influence subatomic behavior is upsetting to mathematicians and traditional scientists because it means reality, or truth as some may refer to it, either does not exist without an observer, or exists in a multitude of states until it is observed (the latter sounds preferable since it implies an existence-to-existence phenomenon rather than a non-existence-to-existence one), with the observation causing reality to choose which shape it will take. Quantum physics is very upsetting, and very mind-bending, because

it also means that existence, and the rhythms that make it up, are predicated by probabilities, or a roll of the dice, and truth is not necessarily a fixed concept (you may have heard it described as *relativity*).

Before you think this essay is a dense and brain-battering explanation of the most complex mathematical concepts in the world (so extraordinary that Albert Einstein, in his disbelief, resolved that he didn't understand it), let me set you straight. This is actually an exploration of fiction and writing—call it quantum fiction. That no doubt sounds bizarre, and it is, but I would argue that the process of writing and creating a fictional universe has at least a kind of mystical, bizarre element to it, and I suspect much of that *reality creation* is not only random, like rolling the dice, but also is in part influenced by the tiny quanta that make up the underlying rhythms (a kind of consciousness on the part of the creator, or god of the imagined world), and in part influenced by the reader, who is the observer recreating the reality in his mind.

These are our basic elements: rhythm (vibration, or even movement); probabilities (possibilities); a continuum (the dream of reading); spooky action at a distance (effect on the reader, or resonance); reality (truth) creation; simultaneous existences (the creator's existence, the creator's created existence, and the reader's multiplicity of possible interpretations); universes within the smallest of containers (thoughts or imagination or books). Okay, so they're not all so basic, and neither are the basic building blocks, the quanta, at work in every atom that makes up every aspect of the universe.

Bringing it more down to earth, I believe that forming the rhythm of our prose (consciously or unconsciously) works in much the same way as some aspects as quantum physics. We, as writers, measure the possibilities of word choices, word pairings, and word strings. We guess at the probability of a successful outcome in a (seemingly) random manner

and decide on a rhythm of language that is pleasing to us. By doing so we are creating a kind of magic or energy or reality that exists beneath the words themselves, which forms a quiet resonance with the reader. It's a somewhat dangerous process. Mess up the rhythm that is the basis of the created reality and you mess up your reader's reality, too. Fortunately, a new reality can be created on the second draft.

So, for our purposes, this largely will be an intuitive look at (maybe even a thought experiment about) the concept of quantum fiction, i.e., the function of rhythm and reality creation. "Intuitive," as an approach, I think is as appropriate as string theory, the branch of quantum theory from which we will pull many of our ideas, itself. Like proofs of God's existence, string theory works as an explanation but is not falsifiable, thereby making it a bit of a faith-based science. My goal is not to make you understand quantum physics (few can anyway, and I, myself, am not among that few), or to delve into equations, or digress into the pettifoggery of minute arguments that come with this particular field. Neither will we invoke any more than we have to the laws of meter and feet or label sets of syllables as dactylic or trochaic as you would with poetry, not only because prose is a different, more intuitive animal, but also because the structural and rigid (nearly dogmatic) trappings of poetic measurement are more in line with Newtonian physics, or the laws of the universe that applied until Einstein showed up. But we will use it some, since we have to measure, at least a little. Edgar Allen Poe, then, serves as our Isaac Newton, an avatar of the classical stance on rhythm and prose. Then we will examine James Joyce and William Faulkner, who represent the new wave of rhythm and reality creation, our more quantum fiction writers.

Since quantum theory represents a new way of looking at life, the universe, and everything, this paper serves the same purpose, but with fiction. It's not important that we fully understand quantum mechanics, only that we run with the concepts and make them our own,

scientifically rigorous or not, and make sense of them. Amazingly, “making sense” of it ultimately could be something different for both of us. This is an intuitive look at the vibrations underlying the basic elements—the syllable, the sound, the word, the word pair, the sentence, the paragraph—to understand how those vibrations *affect* the outcome of the prose; how the author’s intrinsic rhythm influences the perception, the consciousness, of the reader; how rhythm affects the felt resonance of a selection of prose; how rhythm (vibration) affects all.

An Extremely Simplified, Selective, and Brief Overview of Quantum Physics

As said earlier, at the heart of everything is a vibration. If you look within any piece of matter, at the tiny building blocks that make up subatomic particles like protons or electrons, you would see that those particles do not behave like particles, but like waves, the same as light or sound. String theory (a theory because these are mathematical observations rather than direct observations) is a descriptor of these particle-waves that allows, as the name implies, people to imagine them less like dots and more like strings (like vocal chords!) which vibrate. How they vibrate determines how the larger particle behaves, and thus the frequency influences a very small part of reality (Kuhn).

Under quantum theory, the laws governing how these particle-waves behave apply to every inch of the universe, and even seem to have the properties of tiny universes themselves. Studying them challenged the traditional three-dimensional and even four dimensional (including time) views of space because the particle-waves seemed to exist in ten or eleven dimensions. Unfortunately for the solidification of the theory, all of this seems to occur in the absence of gravity. The greatest minds on earth haven’t been able to fit gravity into their equations, which work out otherwise, but understanding how these particle-waves behave—gravity or no—has led to lasers, DVD players, computers, MRIs, and a host of

modern technological wonders.

But “understanding” isn’t the right word. The right word is “predicting,” and this is where it gets spooky—the kind of spooky that leads otherwise reasonable, proof-obsessed scientists to postulate about time-travel, parallel universes, and also consciousness, typically in the realm of philosophers. The right word is “predicting” because all of those solid technological advancements are based on probabilities, or the best odds that particle-waves will behave a certain way, as though natural laws are no longer laws at all but instead natural *tendencies*. Imagine gravity only *tending* to pull us toward the ground and, once out of a few billion or trillion instances, it throws one sideways toward the wall. As ridiculous as that sounds, that’s how particle-waves behave, acting at random and sometimes seemingly by conscious choice. All of the great advancements of the last century were based on scientists’ ability to make calculated bets on particle-wave behavior. But the bigger lesson is that the fabric of reality isn’t guaranteed.

And it’s worse than that--the act of watching reality, or watching particle-waves behave, changes reality. Suppose a light particle, or a photon, moves from Point A to Point B. The number of paths the photon is infinite, but research shows the possibility that the photon takes all paths, or none of the paths at all, and instead just *is* in one place and then just *is* in another, operating much like a thought or an idea (Ismael). It’s probable, then, that the photon exists in all possibilities at once until it is observed--which lends it a sort of strange omnipresence. The act of observation, of merely being conscious of it, changes that omnipresence and collapses it into one distinct form. This means determining which path the photon takes cannot be measured in real time since the act of measuring it actually influences which path it takes; one imposes a straight line on the path merely after the fact for psychological comfort, but it may indeed be a case of subatomic teleportation. Regardless,

the disturbing (and essential) lesson is that the observer's expectation seems causal, and now we have consciousness injected into the natural world, which should, in a perfect, less upsetting universe exist and operate regardless of consciousness. (It is a type of theory that recently led researchers to the conclusion that by merely observing dark matter in the universe back in 1998, the researchers actually shortened the lifespan of the universe, since it existed in a perpetuity of simultaneous states until they looked at it, thus causing it to begin decaying. Who knows if they're right? (Highfield)).

Dr. Leon Lederman, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, described the way photons behave by way of an analogy involving two men and a store window. One man stops on the sidewalk to look at his reflection. Another man is on the inside, looking out at the man looking at his reflection. Light particles will *choose* to either bounce off the window so the first man sees his reflection, or go through the glass so the second man can see the man on the sidewalk. The photons choose which way to go at random, as though flipping a coin (Kuhn).

In addition to making random choices, particles sometimes appear telekinetic, affecting the behavior of other particles that are not connected to or near them. Einstein called this phenomenon "spooky action at a distance." Poor Einstein didn't like any of this thought, of course, and was inclined not to believe his own findings despite the correct equations in front of him. Coming out of a Newtonian world where everything was absolute and fixed, the randomness of the behavior was especially bothersome to him, prompting his famous reply: "God doesn't play dice." A more modern Einstein, Stephen Hawking, concluded otherwise decades later when he said, "Not only does God play dice, but he sometimes throws them where they cannot be seen" ("Quotes").

Danish physicist Neils Bohr, an Einstein contemporary, was also bothered by what quantum physics meant for reality, saying that if it "doesn't make you *schwindlig* (dizzy), you

haven't really understood it" (Kuhn). Nevertheless, their work inspired a revolution of thought and thought experiments, one of the more famous and elaborate of which involves a cat in a box with a certain probability of exposure to poison gas. According to the theory, the cat would be both dead and alive until you opened the box to find out which. Looking, of course, would influence the result (Louis). Reality, based on these subatomic vibrations, became very strange indeed, and the concept of reality evolved over time until more recent physicists, like Stanford professor Dr. Andrei Linde, have been forced to use loftier, more beautiful language. "The best current idea," he said, "envisions seemingly mystical, minuscule strings, all wrapped up in ten dimensions, whose vibrations may make the universe sing" (Kuhn).

Non-scientists, too, have taken the concepts developed from quantum theory and run with them, applying the concepts where they seem suitable. The idea that some sort of consciousness underlies reality has been used by philosophers and theologians alike—the most mind-bending of them suggesting that there is no "big R" Reality, but that humans create their own individual realities, perhaps even to the point that there are alternate universes for those separate realities. (Imagine, then, that for every story we create—worse, every draft of every story—we create a universe for that reality to exist.) If so, everything (and thus, *everyone*) is connected not as separate parts of the whole, but as the Whole itself (evidenced by spooky action at a distance), all on the same sort of base frequency. That frequency would not be unlike, if you stretched it, what a psychic would "tap" into to gather information, the same way a radio picks up radio waves. Or perhaps, as we'll get into later, it is how the writer induces a kind of trance state, and within that trance taps into an underlying rhythm without consciously choosing the pattern of language to produce something rhythmically beautiful, and how the reader enters (we hope) the same dream by reading and by intuitive absorption of the rhythm. The concepts have limitless applications, so long they don't involve gravity (our

true anchor of reality).

The more stubbornly scientific scientists aren't thrilled that quantum physics has been hijacked by freer thinkers, calling such practices "quantum mysticism" or "quantum quackery," as though the thieves of the car don't know how to drive it. That hardly stops anyone from doing it, of course. The hijackers have taken this idea that there is a kind of consciousness in every atom of the universe and have created a kind of cosmic mind to which all minds are connected. Thus, the only reality, including the universe, is equivalent to a thought or an idea. The most famous quantum mystic decried by physicists is perhaps physician and author Deepak Chopra, who espoused the idea of quantum healing, or as it is more commonly known throughout the ages, mind over matter (Stenger). These hijackings are out of bounds, argue the critics, since the spooky ways particle-waves behave are confined to the subatomic world, have no application outside that world, and work only in cases where Newtonian (macroscopic) laws do not apply (such as those scenarios requiring gravity), and vice versa. Extrapolating and applying the concepts to pseudoscientific or "New Age" purposes doesn't hold up to scientific rigors, to which those applying them reiterate that neither does string theory, essentially, since anything requiring human consciousness to work is naturally somewhat mystical. There's more bad news for the purists: I'm helping hijack the next train of thought by applying their concepts where they don't belong, also. And you're coming with me.

Eventually, we'll end up at another interesting concept, one that we'll be spending some time with. The concept is also from Dr. Lederman, who says radiation (the underlying vibration) is not smooth like it appears but consists of "discreet packets," so that instead of a vibration that is zzzzzzz, it is more of a ch, ch, ch, ch in such volume that it appears smooth and continuous like liquid. "If you were to watch from afar someone pouring a stream of fine sand from one bucket to another," he says, "the stream of sand would look like a liquid—a

continuum—to you; but if you got close enough, maybe with a magnifying glass, you would see tiny, discrete grains” (Kuhn). You might say the same for how letters form syllables which form words then sentences and paragraphs—all of those discreet packets piggybacking on one another to create a continuum of sound, vibration, thought, images, and comprehension.

Poe and Classical Interpretation of Rhythm

For Poe, you might say that writing was an exact science, an interesting branch of mathematics, the mathematics of words and sounds. He says as much in his essay, “The Rationale of Verse,” expounding on the pleasure humans take in the *equality* of sounds (199). “Its idea embraces those of similarity, proportion, identity, repetition, and adaptation or fitness,” he writes. Using the example of a crystal, Poe assumes (he assumes a lot, we’ll find) that the equality of the sides and angles is what’s most pleasing about it. Likewise, in language, “I have no doubt, indeed, that the delight experienced, if measurable, would be found to have exact mathematical relations....The perception of pleasure in the equality of sounds is the principle of *Music*” (199).

Thus, when we write, Poe would say, we create a kind of music (sound waves/vibrations for my analogy) that is transformed in the mind of the reader, or better, the listener. In Poe’s estimation, the music must involve a kind of tonal symmetry, an equality of sound in order to be pleasing to the ear, or even the mind’s ear.

Creating this music, this symmetry of sound, is a precise endeavor, a calculation, and not, as he makes clear in another essay called “The Philosophy of Composition,” “a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition” (174). You could interpret that as a refusal to believe, like Einstein’s refusal, in the randomness of creation (or *creating*). He demonstrates this refusal by giving insight into how he composed his fictional poem “The Raven.” Poe decides,

via a rather long and esoteric process, that the melancholy feel he intended for the poem depended on the nature of the sound of the refrain. “[T]he refrain...depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and in thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition” (168). Comfortably and soothingly predictable like the anchor of gravity, the refrain should be brief, he thought, a single sonorous word to close his stanzas. Creation is not random, in Poe’s view, nor is there more than one path to choose.

Everything is fixed and gravity is accounted for within a single word, which he is soon to explain. “[T]hese considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with the *r* as the most producible consonant” (168). Poe says these things as though they are part of the greater Truth, as though the Reality of the long *o* and the *r* sound are absolute, without variance or contradiction. He goes on to say, “The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem” (169). The word “predetermined” is an important one in Poe’s explanation. It reveals just how concretely he feels about writing, how there is a right way, how choosing the right word or sound is never an accident, never an endeavor (to echo Annabelle Lee) that is random in any way, and never one that could exist in a state of simultaneity. He thus concludes, “In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word ‘Nevermore.’ In fact, it was the very first which presented itself” (169). And thus, Poe makes a liar of himself in the last sentence.

He makes word selection sound like a very exact process, but in that last sentence Poe tells us that “‘Nevermore’ *presented itself*.” From where? He doesn’t really say, but it sounds like he had an idea—which sounds born of “impulse or intuition.” Asking where an idea comes from is a bit like the God question. If God created everything, who or what

created God? An idea presenting itself is an idea creating itself. The best science can tell us about ideas, or thoughts, is that they are the result of electrical reactions that occur when synapses fire (www.physorg.com). (It's more complicated than that, and new research shows synapses have their own spooky action going on, too, but I'm trying to keep the digression to a minimum.) Another way to explain how thoughts occur is that energy, or waves, are in one place (maybe even as several different things), and then in another place, seemingly at random but with some sort of underlying consciousness. I'm teetering dangerously on the line of quantum mysticism here (and that will get worse by the end), but we must revisit the earlier quantum mystic tenet that there is only thought, and that reality is created by a singular yet collective cosmic mind. Perhaps that cosmic mind is the place from where "Nevermore" presented itself to Poe.

Whatever the case, four years later he seems to have changed his mind about the whole thing. In another essay called "The Poetic Principle," Poe taps into something much more in line with the lessons, or dilemmas, great thinkers like Einstein and Bohr would discover through the mathematics of reality.

Melancholy, which was so measurable and not intuitive in the previous essay, is now also in his view the most appropriate poetic expression of Beauty. In "The Poetic Principle," Poe defines "the Poetry of words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty" (193); and Beauty, it turns out, is not so calculable, but instead "an immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man" (191). It is "at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above" (192). Poe goes on to claim that "inspired by an ecstatic prescience [fitting word there, *pre-science*] of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that

Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone” (192). Read that aloud and listen carefully to what Poe is discovering. Beauty is at once this *and* that; things and thoughts of Time are *multiform*; and to attain just a portion of that Loveliness that is Beauty, Time, or Eternity, we must look at the basic elements at work within them. In quantum physics, an understanding of the universe, of space and time (the space-time continuum) is only gained in exactly the same way, by examining the elements that make it up, reality in the smallest slices of life. By doing so, we found out that the forces at work in the smallest of universes are the same forces at work in the larger universe.

“And thus,” Poe continues:

When by Poetry—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep then—not as the Abate Gravina supposes—through excess of pleasure, but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses. (192)

Poe has touched upon something here dizzying in its own right, something reminiscent of Bohr’s despair at how *schwindlig* the brief and indeterminate glimpses of reality (*now*) and the universe (*eternity*) made him via the lens of quantum physics. It is through something small—a poem—that we might see it, and through something vibratory—music—that we might feel the largeness and multiplicity of reality.

There’s something else at work in that selection of Poe’s prose that defies his original nothing-is-random stance, and it is important for understanding how we as writers create prose. It’s much easier for Poe to argue that his poetry is not random (intuitive) because he

consciously constructed the rhythms of his poetry (and partly, perhaps, of a desire to believe that his creations are real, are ordered reconstructions of a predictable universe). Prose, as we'll get into more later, is a much more random process of rhythmic creation, a way of tapping into rhythms unconsciously. The previous passage is poetic and rhythmic, and if you look at it closely, at the ch-ch-chs, Poe demonstrates a tendency to fall into an iambic structure, a rising meter that consists of a pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables in succession. It's a *tendency* because it is not iambic throughout, which makes me doubt that Poe consciously built it that way. Falling into a meter could have been natural, or the result of experience from years of poetic practice, but the end effect for me is that the prose builds to a crescendo via the rising meter that is so felt that you can nearly hear the cymbals crashing it home: *a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow*. (The p, ch, and sh sounds make the cymbal smashes, at least in my reality.) I don't think it was entirely conscious. I think the words and sounds *presented* themselves to him, as "Nevermore" did, the result of synapses firing at random, just like particle-waves behave. He might still, dead as he is, disagree with that.

Consider, however, that Poe's rhythm was innate, and that it was born of a subconscious necessity in order to express something as intangible as beauty, or a concept that is high enough to be beyond words (what might be referred to as the Realm of Inexpressibility). I believe this is what Poe is trying to express when he speaks of the Eternity and Time and Beauty and Now that he can't quite grasp, and that inexpressibility is precisely the province of the rhythm and the vibration, not just the words themselves which are mere gravitational conventions of symbolic expression, that allows us those brief and indeterminate glimpses. Reality is relayed via rhythmic expression, a succession of sounds, and with it an intuitive understanding of what the rhythm conveys about a passage via elements beneath

the surface of the text. It is a succession of individual sounds (vibrations), tiny packets of rhythmic information, that somehow produces an intended or, admittedly, unintended feeling in the reader (spooky action at a distance), and conveys the greater, illusive truth; a succession of vibrations that forms a continuum of meaning as if the vibrations were not separate, but a whole fluid body, much like music, as a whole, is made of individual notes, cannot exist without them, and that singular collective strikes resonance within the listener. That is quantum writing. That's what Poe was doing, even if he didn't know it.

The Dream of Reading, a Continuum

As Poe makes clear, the rhythm of the words in poetry is carefully measured. And as said earlier, in prose, rhythm is not. In prose, rhythm is more felt, more of an intuitive process as the writer writes by ear—by listening and saying “Yes, that sounds right.” Like the various applications of quantum physics, where technologists create something very useful by calculating the probability of how a particle-wave will behave, writers create in much the same way with words, measuring the likelihood that a set of words or sounds will produce the desired effect. This does not mean examining poetry is irrelevant to writing prose, only that prose is less rigid (i.e., more random) in structure. But because of Poe's reluctance to accept the randomness of creation, I lump him in with Isaac Newton as one with a classic (macroscopic) view of the world.

The Einsteinian quantum writer will not pay attention to rhythm just for the sake of poetic effect, but also in order to create a smooth continuum of reality. The continuum is built of those discreet packets mentioned earlier, and serves to build up a dream into which the reader can enter. The quality of the rhythm has a direct effect on the quality of the dream created. To add another quantum physics (mysticism) angle to this concept, the continuum of

discreet ch, ch, ch constructs a reality for the reader, who observes it, and by observing it alters it a bit. This alteration can't be helped. But I propose that the extent to which the reality is altered can be controlled via the correct rhythm, or via the best probability of rhythm.

For example, John Gardner in his book The Art of Fiction, says faulty rhythm can break the dream of fiction altogether for a reader. "Many writers, including some famous ones, write with no consciousness of the poetic effects available through prose rhythm" (106). A writer who never thinks of those poetic effects, he continues, is prone "to distract the reader from his dream by clunky rhythm" (106). In other words, there is a disconnect between author and reader, a brokenness in the created (and preferably shared) realities. Instead of one continuum, a wholeness, you can have many disjointed continua—or worse, the reader's own outside reality creeps in intermittently.

Personally, I have issues like this one of disjointedness with Stephen King's writing. Though an amazing storyteller, there is something about his prose rhythm that often reminds me of a flat tire—abrupt and floppy and noisy and flapping: "She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn't get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day's rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back" (On Writing 22). That it reads to me like a flat tire could be very subjective; it could even be a regional, dialectical conflict—King's from Maine and I am from Kentucky—resulting in two very different speech rhythms as well, but something about his rhythm doesn't match up with my own, and that bothers me because it breaks the dream. Upon closer inspection, those two sentences have no discernible meter, and the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables is very uneven, perhaps *too* random in placement. (As an aside, it also occurs to me that too much randomness makes probability calculation impossible, and could even contribute to the suspense in King's stories.) The rhythm pulls me out of the dream perhaps

because the mathematics of the rhythm just didn't work out in my internal continuum. You can make a case for it in the right circumstances. If what the author is describing is a flat tire, for example, then flat-tire rhythm would be wonderfully appropriate as the underlying emphasis.

On a second look, either because there is a different observer, or because the original observer has a different expectation (true in this case), another reality for those two sentences *presents itself* (from another dimension or universe?). In a way, the sentences mimic the tide. "She said the girl swam out past the rip," and the tide goes out, "couldn't get back in" and the tide comes in, "and began screaming for help." It easily could be argued that King used punctuation and clauses to create a rhythm that mimics the tide effect, and most likely did it subconsciously. It easily could be argued that I'm too much of a landlubber to have realized it. Regardless, because of my subjective consciousness, I still find it clunky, especially since its apparent clunkiness helps illustrate my point better. This is, after all, the reality I'm creating for you, and all outcomes are distinctly possible in a reality that includes quantum physics.

The inverse of rhythm that is too disjointed, and Gardner echoes this in The Art of Fiction, is prose that is *too* rhythmic. In his short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe again demonstrates his tendency to fall into meter in his prose. It's hard to say if it is purposefully done in the example to come, but it could be an attempt to capture the essence of the ecstatic, surreal scene involving a man who's losing his mind. Again, my example is subjective, infected with my own truth, or my own consciousness as I observe the outcome, and another reader's consciousness may produce different results. But my first reaction to the following selection was that I was so entranced by the rhythm, which is built with evenly distributed iambs and spondees creating an rising intensity, that my mind went blank as I read. And so, I held no comprehension of the section altogether, as though pulled into a

mystical, meditative state. It is possible that by observing it through my own lucid dreaming-type sensitivities, I collapsed it into a particular state where once it existed in many, thus causing it to decay (much like how observing dark matter shortens the universe's lifespan). You can collapse it into a different state if you wish, but I need it in this state in order to make a point. Isn't reality bizarre?

Poe writes of Mr. Usher:

His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement. (Edgar Allen Poe 114)

Maddening and beautiful, typical of Poe, expected of Poe, especially in the 19th century. But the Poe-induced nirvana not only pulled me out of the dream, but vibrated me right out and into another dream, especially around that too-sweet word pairing “guttural utterance,” which in poetry you would define, aptly, as a falling meter, and here has the uncanny resemblance, especially with the words before it—*perfectly modulated guttural utterance*—of a galloping horse. *Boom*, I'm out; I'm thinking of horses and not of Mr. Usher's state of mind. As such, the for me dream is broken.

Again, on the second read, it occurs to me that the chaotic rising meter Poe has used conveys the dementia of Usher, much in the same way he used a metronome while writing “A Tell-Tale Heart” to help him create the literary equivalent of a beating heart. But that is also in line with the principles of quantum physics, as the information is carried upon that rhythm to create a certain reality. In my case, on the first read the rhythm misfired (like gravity suddenly

tossing me sideways), illustrating how too much rhythm can detract from writing, from the continuum of the dream.

The right question, then, is what type of rhythmic balance strikes me as creating the right kind of continuum? Which author's prose embodies that smooth collection of discreet ch-chs, that makes gravity pull down instead of sideways, that makes quantum fiction such a beautiful concept, where the right blend of syllables and word pairs create a steady stream of dreamy vibration? For me, the answer to that is James Joyce. In his book Dubliners, in a story called "An Encounter," Joyce tells the story of two boys skipping school. I've chosen a passage from that story which I think embodies the smooth continuum (and the end-goal of quantum fiction). It's a lengthy passage, but something wonderful happens:

There was nobody but ourselves in the field. When we had lain on the bank for some time without speaking I saw a man approaching from the far end of the field. I watched him lazily as I chewed one of those green stems on which girls tell fortunes. He came along by the bank slowly. He walked with one hand upon his hip and in the other hand he held a stick with which he tapped the turf lightly. He was shabbily dressed in a suit of greenish-black and wore what we used to call a jerry hat with a high crown. He seemed to be fairly old for his moustache was ashen-grey. When he passed at our feet he glanced up at us quickly and then continued his way. We followed him with our eyes and saw that when he had gone on for perhaps fifty paces he turned about and began to retrace his steps. He walked towards us very slowly, always tapping the ground with his stick, so slowly that I thought he was looking for something in the grass. (244)

Like Poe, Joyce has a tendency here to fall into meter. He has three habits in this passage, though there are other anomalous rhythms: iambic (unstress, stress), anapestic

(unstressed, unstressed, stressed), and trochaic (stressed, stressed). What's interesting to me is the balance of these feet, none of them over-vibratory, just a smooth waltz to the end. The trochees are in just the right place to make tapping, or footstep effects: HE TAPPED the TURF LIGHTly....WE FOLLOwED HIM with OUR EYES and SAW that WHEN HE had GONE on for PERHAPS FIFTy PAcEs HE TURNED aBOUT and BEgan to RETRACE his STEPS. The passage also strikes me, more so than the King example, of one that mimics the gentle splashing of a riverbank, near which the boys are situated.

There's something else there, too. Note the lack of commas until the very last sentence, when the sentence is meant to slow down right at the word "slowly," and again right before the phrase "so slowly." Until then, it is one long continuum of blended syllables, with a rhythm so unobtrusive that you hardly know it's there. More importantly it doesn't distract from the storytelling. Everything is ultra-clear as Joyce pushes us along.

Aside from the comma placement, though, I don't think this rhythm was conscious, at least not completely. I believe, through practice of course, Joyce like a quantum scientist creating new technology made a calculated bet that turned out the right way, and a natural rhythm comes through as one that is stream-like. At least, that's the reality Joyce has conveyed to me, and the more I look at it, the more I wonder how random that really could have been—just like we might wonder about how photons randomly choose to bounce off of or go through glass, just as we might look at the universe and marvel in disbelief that any of it is a random act of nature.

The arrangement of words and word choice matters too. Try rearranging the sentences. Change "There was nobody but ourselves in the field" to "We were the only ones in the field" or "There wasn't anyone in the field but us." The arrangement of words severely alters the rhythm. The first rearrangement creates a stutter at the beginning—a wuh-wuh with

the w's. The second takes away the anchor and drumbeat of the b in "anybody," replaces it with a slippery w in "one" which causes a slide into the sudden gravel of the "tus" sound. But really, if we were this conscious of the process of prose rhythm, we might never get anything written.

Echoing quantum physicists, Gardner argues that prose rhythm is more of a random, by-ear-and-by-practice phenomenon: "I don't know, myself—and I suspect most writers would say the same—what it is that I do, what formulas I use for switching bad sentences around to make better ones; but I do it all the time, less laboriously every year, trying to creep up on the best ways of getting things said" (154).

I would argue that good writers over time become better at probabilities of word combinations, and become lightning fast at guessing what the best vibratory couplings are. Similar to when musicians come to a keen awareness of the right progression of notes, so do writers come to know how to put sentences together, and know to tell others that, though there are no immovable laws in prose, several long sentences would ideally be followed with a short one. That's for punch. But the application of the rhythms, just like in quantum physics, is based on probabilities.

However Joyce did what he did, he effectively slipped us right into this reality, this continuum, and then, like a good writer, got out of the way. And Poe? Is it literary sacrilege to call him a prissy showoff? How about if I admit I sometimes have the same problem?

Rhythm, Reality Creation, and Spooky Action at a Distance

If Poe is at once our icon of literary past and rhythmic avatar from the world of Newton—the world where reality was fixed and precisely metered—then it is necessary to name a literary representative of Einstein's new, much more relative world. I choose William Faulkner,

though there are many, and I choose him because I don't know of any author better at altering his rhythms (and punctuation) to suit his character's reality; I want to say he writes like a man possessed, but William Styron already did.

In our new world, reality is no longer an absolute, but is rather a relative concept that involves seemingly conscious waves randomly acting on the world. This is why quantum physicists calculate the most likely paths that waves will take, and based on this are able to produce very practical new technologies. Their calculations also mean that several alternate realities are now distinct possibilities. The trick for technologists is to apply those possibilities toward something useful because theories aren't much good to the end user, and neither are mere probabilities.

But these are all very cold mathematical realities, so allow me to walk the fine line into quantum mysticism in order to get a better grip on Faulkner. The quantum mystic will tell you that everything in the universe is created by *you*, at least in part. At the very least, your perception or expectation of reality is what forms it. Much like the scientists who observed dark matter in 1998 and shortened the lifespan of the universe, writers create a reality via observation, and convey that reality via rhythmical information (like Morse code!), which is observed and sometimes altered by the reader. I'm calling this, courtesy of Einstein, "spooky action at a distance." What I like about Faulkner then, as a quantum writer, is the way he creates realities and is able to make those realities truly felt via his rhythms as the reader taps into that cosmic mind.

An author can create his realities, and there are a number of possibilities for them. In one instance the reality intended isn't the reality envisioned (or recreated) in the reader's mind. That's a failure of application, as Poe's segment was for me. In another instance, several readers envision several different realities, which may have been the intent of the

author, or it may not have been. Some authors work for exactly that purpose, conveying at least one reality that is up for interpretation.

But the real trick is creating a reality just about every reader envisions the same way and, as the vibrations seep into the reader, to create resonance so every reader potentially receives the same (intended) *feeling* from it. For this shared effect to happen, quantum physicists would say the author must calculate the probabilities correctly to affect the reader. I've heard it said of J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien that their readers report envisioning scenes exactly the same way. Whatever reality these authors have created is shared by their fans. Their stories are fairly simple in style, but are also mostly visual in how they're conveyed. Rowling and Tolkien have mastered at least part of the spooky action at a distance tenet.

But Faulkner's approach to balancing the equation is different. Faulkner not only takes on the perspective of his characters in The Sound and the Fury along with their personalities and thought processes, but he also takes on their very biorhythms. Each character has his very own rhythm and through that rhythm Faulkner conveys a tremendous amount of information without actually having to tell the reader about the character.

How, for example, do you get inside the reality of a mentally handicapped man? If told in the first person, like Faulkner's Maury/Benjy, the character may not have the words or ability to describe himself, and would have many other storytelling limits as well. Faulkner uses simplicity, repetition, and fixation, but it's the rhythm that will get your attention and tell you what you need to know:

....She smelled like trees.

She smelled like trees. In the corner it was dark, but I could see the window.

I squatted there, holding the slipper. I couldn't see it, but my hands saw it,

and I could hear it getting night, and my hands saw the slipper but I couldn't see myself, but my hands could see the slipper and I squatted there, hearing it getting dark. (56)

There are macro-level indications of Benjy's mental condition via the confusion of senses: his hands see and don't feel; his ears hear the level of light. The language is simple, and the reader wonders about the fixation with the slipper.

But I also like the subtler way Faulkner has created this reality on the rhythmic prose level. Like Joyce, there's a mixture of iambic and anapestic rising notes, but also stress-unstress falling ones. And like Joyce, Faulkner inserts trochees to sometimes create a rocking feel, and other times to create a clapping impression. *She smelled like trees.* All stressed, clap, clap, clap, clap. *I couldn't see it, but my hands saw it...* like rocking—stress stress, unstress, stress stress, unstress, stress stress stress stress. There's no word over two syllables, and the syllables themselves are stressed and choppy, especially at the fixation points. The phrase lengths don't vary much, and most of the way through the paragraph, what is said is a repetition or reordering of the sentences or phrases right before it. The repetition of the word "slipper" almost has a clapping effect—slipper, slipper, slipper. Everything physical the reader needs to know about Benjy is in that paragraph, except for what he looks like, and without having to come out and say this character is mentally challenged. Faulkner has created a reality, and the reader has felt it via the vibrations.

Later, when Faulkner switches characters to Benjy's brother Quentin and takes on his personality, the rhythm is also altered, along with the language, to portray a young man who is mentally disturbed. In the next chapter, we have Quentin's interior monologue created via seemingly disjointed patterns and disconnected thought. But there is a very distinct rhythm at work:

I had forgotten the glass, but I could *hands can see cooling fingers invisible*
swan-throat where less than Moses rod the glass touch tentative not to
drumming lean cool throat drumming cooling the metal the glass full overfull
cooling the glass the fingers flushing sleep leaving the taste of dampened
sleep in the long silence of the throat... (131)

On the macro-level, Quentin is clearly mentally ill. Nothing he thinks makes sense, just a loose collection of seemingly disconnected words. He too fixates on objects and concepts, and attributes strange objects to the senses, e.g., “the taste of dampened sleep.” But it makes a bit more sense in context than hearing darkness (though we may guess in Benjy’s case that there are crickets and frogs).

The operative word in the above rant, though, is “drumming,” and the sentences mimic a drumming rhythm, bringing to mind old clichés about marching to the beat of a different drummer: *touch tentative not to drumming*. That beat is very distinct at the syllable level, though the count seems to vary: *hands can see cool*—stress stress stress stress, 1, 2, 3, 4; —*ing fingers invisible swan-throat where less*—unstress stress, unstress unstress stress, unstress unstress stress stress stress stress, 1, 2, 3, 4; and so on. Sometimes he uses four stressed syllables in succession. Sometimes it’s two or three stressed syllables in succession. Sometimes it’s rising or falling before the succession of stressed syllables, but the effect is the drumming. Faulkner transmits that information on a quantum level, a reality felt beneath the words.

The final Faulkner character has the most interesting rhythm of the three. The eldest brother, Jason, is painted as a self-righteous, self-centered, and self-entitled jerk. In this next small passage, listen to his voice in your head and see if you can hear the steady ratcheting up of the rhythm underneath, a constant winding up that makes you sure Jason’s a powder

keg (I'll only do half the classic Faulkner-length sentence:

...God knows what I'll do about it just to look at water makes me sick and I'd just as soon swallow gasoline as a glass of whiskey and Lorraine telling you how to find out she says If I catch you fooling with any of these whores you know what I'll do she says I'll whip her grabbing at her I'll whip her as long as I can find her she says and I says if I don't drink that's my business but have you ever found me short I says I'll buy you enough beer to take a bath in if you want it because I've got every respect for a good honest whore because with Mother's health and the position I try to uphold to have her with no respect for what I try to do for her than to make her name and my name and my Mother's name a byword in the town. (174)

By the end of this chapter, Jason has a terrible headache, and there's a good reason why. This is how he thinks, his reality imposed on ours: he thinks in constant tides of rising meter with small breaks followed by another, longer swelling. *God knows what I'll do about it just to look at water makes me sick*—break for “and”—*I'd just as soon swallow gasoline as a glass of whiskey*—break for “and”—*Lorraine telling you how to find out she says If I catch you fooling with any of these whores you know what I'll do*—break, and so on throughout the entire chapter, with longer swelling and fewer breaks, until his head is killing him (180).

This is quantum fiction, at its purist, at work. It cannot be read, but only felt, only subconsciously understood. Only thought exists in Faulkner's characters, only perception, with several different realities as you go from character to character. It's nearly impossible to interpret the prose from the words alone, but the rhythms that underlie the words, the particle-waves, form a continuum that moves from wherever thought comes from, and moves to, perhaps both randomly and consciously taking any number of paths, to my own

consciousness, where observing them (but not consciously reading the symbols imposed on reality) collapses them into a probable state of existence in my mind. Once that transfer occurs, the action, the characters, the meaning is very *felt*, as though the reader and author share or are connected to the cosmic mind, and resonance is accomplished via spooky action at a distance.

Dizzy yet?

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Dennis Waddell

"Scarecrow." Acrylic on canvas.



"Meeting strangers that enjoy my work is always two things. First, and most obvious, it is extremely gratifying. Creating art is always an enjoyable experience, but seeing it's appreciation and the entertainment it brings others gives the art a new level of justification. Secondly, having strangers see my work has sometimes been violating. Some of my work deals with very personal thoughts and feelings. To have others share in these can be ultimately rewarding but can also feel embarrassing. Adding these two experiences together creates a very sweet and sour effect that is admittedly addicting." [The artist on accepting an invitation to meet the man who bought this painting.]

Dissonance

Just why the control gate permitted or issued an errant current here,
in the delivery of just the right energy to the variable capacitor, we have no clue
and most probably won't ever have. But the effect of it was immediate
as the slightly sour tone in the chord it was part of, not too unlike the milk tipped

into the coffee some mornings showing suddenly some resistance to blending
because it was secretly "on the edge," "going off" without any tell-tale off-scent signaling the
beginning of its exhaustion or demise—a truth indeed substantiated
by the tiny white flecks floating like lifeboats on the tan circular sea in the mug.

O, if (or if *only*, as they say in the diminishing regret-scenes of movies) we could simply
enlarge the view, we could maybe see traces of the ghosts or chill winds
that blow over the surfaces of the invisible, altering expectations or regularities
with that light eerie music their motions make in constant small passage, and get

some answers or at least crumb trails to try. Meanwhile, there's this sad saffron moon stuck in
the corner of an evening bedroom window whispering "It's over, over now,
just gather your things and forget it; go now to the next square": A sign-off,
I take it, of things as they were or as we thought—that at least will let flow in the
next setting—or anyway the next step toward some next unveiling.

“True Will?: Crowley’s Holy Guardian Angel, The Self, and Nietzsche,” in documenting the history of the Knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel also uncovers the constant existential struggle with defining self and True Will. Dixon divides his analysis into four primary parts all framed against his seven month long experience performing the Abramelin Operation. In addition to bringing understanding about his own revelation from the Abramelin Operation, Dixon provides deep textual analysis into past interpretations of the HGA, undermining much of what Aleister Crowley wrote and favoring a Nietzschean perspective on identity and purpose. - DL

Rod Dixon

True Will?: Crowley’s Holy Guardian Angel, The Self, and Nietzsche

The so-called Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel is considered by many to be the holy grail of Western Esotericism. The concept that an aspiring adept can make contact with a personally assigned form of preternatural intelligence comes from The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, a spiritual manuscript supposedly penned in 1458 by Abraham von Worms for his son, Lamech. The Holy Guardian Angel—which from here on will be referred to as the HGA—plays a central role in the philosophy of Aleister Crowley, known as Thelema¹. Crowley’s ideas helped form the philosophical foundations of modern esoteric movements like Wicca (Greenfield 260-276) and Scientology². A critical understanding of his perspective on the HGA illuminates the underpinnings of many new religious movements and reveals parallels not only in modern New Age spiritualists, but in the essentialist assumptions of some modern progressives.

My interest in the HGA came to head in 2007 when I began a novel about an Iraqi War

1 Thelema is Greek for “will.” Crowley founded the philosophy/religion—Thelemites disagree on which it is—based off a text he allegedly received from his own HGA in 1904. This text, *Liber Al vel Legis*, is commonly referred to as the Book of the Law.

2 L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, played apprentice to one of Crowley’s pupils, rocket-scientist “Jack” John Whiteside Parsons. And like the apprentice of *Fantasia* he left his master’s estate in ruins when he ran off to Florida with with Parson’s lover and savings (Pendle 267-270).

veteran who, upon returning home an amputee, undertakes the Abramelin Operation in the hope of obtaining the Knowledge and Conversation of his HGA. I decided it would be in the best interest of the work if I attempted my own Abramelin Operation, the results of which would provide material for the book. It seemed unreasonable to critique both a New Age doctrine and historical text I had no first-hand experience of.

I dedicated myself to the task, anointed myself with the holy oil, burned the proper incense, and for seven-months I meditated for thirty-minutes to one-hour a day, every day³. It was during the third month I had the only mystical experience worth speaking of. I was in a dark cave—in the vision, that is—and the disembodied face of a woman wearing a black habit floated in front of me. “You dare to know me?” she asked, and recognizing her to be the angel I sought, I said that yes, I did. A strong and terrifying blast of wind overwhelmed me. I was as helpless as dust against that wind; it could lay waste to me if it wished. The woman seemed unaffected by the vortex. She pushed her face into mine and ended the revelation, in a voice that was part challenge by saying that to know her was to “Know chaos.”

When I came back to normal consciousness my first thought was of that wind; it reminded me of John 3:5, “The wind blows wherever it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going.” But I pushed that aside and focused on her more glamorous last words about knowing “chaos,” convincing myself more was sure to come. A message that, I assumed, would figuratively tear my world apart. It never did. That was, to my chagrin, the revelation, and the essay that follows is the result of reflection upon on it.

3 I used the modernized method outlined by Jason Augustus Newcomb's *21st Century Mage* for this task. I alternated meditation styles, breath counting one day and sitting *zazen* the next. For the oil I used Crowley's recipe, which omits the galangal and calls for more oil of cinnamon than the original, and burns like all hell when drawn down and across the forehead. The original oil is based off the Holy oil of anointing found in Exodus 30:22-25.

The HGA

The modern view of the HGA differs somewhat from the being presented in The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage. Abraham von Worms describes the HGA as a stepping stone to divine power. Like many grimoires of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries it insists that only the Judeo-Christian god can grant the would be Magus control over unseen spirits. The difference between the HGA and the angelic invocations of other grimoires, such as the Goetia, is that the aspirant working in von Worms' system must prove herself worthy of divine power through a lengthy period of retreat and prayer. Where the Goetia calls for the gathering of proper paraphernalia—lambskin hexagram, blood of a virgin black rooster—and angelic assistance comes as a given, the Abramelin system calls for spiritual accomplishment and initiation.

The concept of the HGA was largely forgotten in Western Esotericism until Samuel L. MacGregor Mathers' translation of a French copy of The Sacred Magick of Abramelin the Mage to English in 1897, after which it gained relative notoriety. The HGA became an important part of the Golden Dawn's ritual and teaching, where it was referred to as Higher Genius. But it was Aleister Crowley who most notably changed the HGA from a means to an end, making it the central goal of his esoteric philosophy of Thelema:

It should never be forgotten for a single moment that the central and essential work of the Magician is the attainment of the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel. Once he achieves this he must of course be left entirely in the hands of that Angel... (Magick Without Tears, ch. LXXXIII)

The purpose of the HGA in Thelema is to reveal to the adept her True Will, a term which will be examined below. Crowley's opinion of what exactly the HGA is, however,

changes over time. In his commentaries to Liber AI, he refers to the HGA as the Silent Self. The would-be adept who is able to carry out Crowley's spiritual practices will loose her "Silent Self, helpless and witless, hidden within us... This is the Task of the Adept, to have the Knowledge and Conversation of His Holy Guardian Angel to become aware of his nature and his purpose, fulfilling them" (I:7). Here, Crowley's estimation of the HGA is analogous to the psychological concept of the unconscious. Crowley explicitly compares becoming aware of the silent self to psychoanalysis. Indeed, the modern Thelemite IAO 131 equates the Knowledge and Conversation of the HGA with C.G. Jung's concept of individuation in his "Psychological Commentary of Liber AI vel Legis⁴." Whereby we embrace "our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness..." (Jung 154).

It is later in his life that Crowley rejects this view, insisting the HGA is an external and independent being:

Now, on the other hand, there is an entirely different type of angel... They are microcosms in exactly the same sense as men and women are. They are individuals who have picked up elements of their composition as possibility and convenience dictates, exactly as we do ourselves...

I believe that the Holy Guardian Angel is a Being of this order... He is not, let me say with emphasis, a mere abstraction from yourself; and that is why I have insisted rather heavily that the term "Higher Self" implies "a damnable heresy and a dangerous delusion" (Magick Without Tears, ch. XLIII).

True Will

⁴ The use of pseudonym has historically been used by members of occult societies to not only differentiate their mundane self from their spiritual self, but as a means of identity concealment. Thelemites often add a significant number after their name as Crowley was fond of numerology.

Though his views on the HGA change, Crowley's belief in what the angel can deliver doesn't. The Thelemic concept of True Will comes from a passage in Liber Al vel Legis: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law." This law, Thelemites quickly point out, doesn't mean do what you want. An aspirant's first goal is to make contact with her HGA in order to ascertain her True Will, which can be seen as "the spiritual core or quintessence of each person, which has a divinely self-ordained path through the world of experience" (Maroney 164).

Crowley uses the metaphor of a star's orbit to illustrate. "[E]ach star moves in an appointed path without interference. There is plenty of room for all; it is only disorder that creates confusion" ("Liber II")⁵.

It's tempting to see the True Will as personal destiny or the ancient Greek concept of fate, but Crowley makes it clear that fulfilling the Will requires "tireless energy" and is the "apotheosis of Freedom" ("Liber II"). In "The Will is Supra-Rational," I.A.O. 113 writes:

The first question one might ask when embarking upon the quest to understand the philosophy of Thelema is 'What is my Will?' or 'How do I know what my Will is?' The answer to this question might initially be presumed to be answerable in the form of a sentence such as 'my Will is to be a doctor' or 'my Will is to eat this sandwich,' but this is not so for this is to restrict the Will to the trappings of language and reason. The Will is the innermost Motion of one's being, an individual expression of the Eternal Energy of the cosmos.

To confine the Will to logical expression is to inherently assert a limit. Further, it assumes that one must have a logical reason for acting such-and-such way...

'It is ridiculous to ask a dog why it barks,' for this is simply an expression of its

⁵ It was mistakenly believed in Crowley's time that "the stars were arranged so that they would never collide" (Maroney 165).

nature, not determined by any kind of rational process. (17-18)

Echoes of Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit—naturally spontaneous and uninhibited.

Nietzsche's work and its intersection with Thelemic ideas is important to analyze here, as Nietzsche had a profound influence on Crowley⁶. But Nietzsche's work, it should be noted, would see Crowley's True Will as idealistically flawed. For Crowley interprets the Will, the self as a matter of *a priori* essence, something that is (re)discovered. This conception of self goes beyond the small esoteric community of Thelema. It runs strong, mistaken, and misused through many sectors of modern thought.

Self as Process

“Teaching to Lie and Obey: Nietzsche on Education” is Stefan Ramaeker's attempt to correct the misuse of Nietzsche's individualist philosophy in the field of education. Particularly the modern trend that would have educators “step down as the representative of a particular view of life” and rather facilitate a child “thought to be capable of discovering within herself what she really wants and capable therefore of giving meaning to her own life” (255). Progressives support abandoning the value bestowing function of education because it “does injustice to...personal identity...[the] true self is suppressed, suffocated and not given the opportunity to develop into what it 'really' is” (261). Progressives cite Nietzsche's perspectivism as the basis for this judgment, mistaking it for a philosophy where only the individual matters.

Crowley and most Thelemites would no doubt support the educational progressives in this belief. It is, in their philosophy, the violence of social norms that buries the Will. Crowley himself wrote:

⁶ Nietzsche is named as one of the Thelemic saints in “Liber XV.” The argument could be made that Crowley merely gave Nietzsche and Rabelais an occult twist.

The uninitiate is a 'Dark Star', and the Great Work for him is to make his veils transparent by 'purifying' them. This 'purification' is really 'simplification'; it is not that the veil is dirty, but that the complexity of its folds makes it opaque. The Great Work therefore consists principally in the solution of complexes. Everything in itself is perfect, but when things are muddled, they become 'evil'" ("Commentaries to Liber AI" I:8).

The modern Thelemite Jason Augustus Newcomb adds, "You are not the product of your own being. You are currently an amalgam of family and cultural tendencies combined in a unique way...The *real* you is something of which you are, for the most part, unaware..." (5).

But Ramaeker makes it clear that Nietzsche's philosophy is incompatible with the progressive agenda—and by extension Thelema⁷—because Nietzsche is above all an anti-essentialist, as "man is the animal not yet determined" (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil Sec. 63). Nietzsche's conception of humanity may be naturalistic and Dionysian, but:

...not in an essentialist or reductionist way. The 'nature' of human beings is to have no essence...Rather this 'nature' can be understood as an empty place from which a multiplicity of possibilities can arise. It is however important to notice that 'empty place' and 'nature' merely act as metaphors to criticise the prevailing uniformity with which human being is represented. *De facto* she is never an empty place, she never is indefinite, but always already a particular possibility, without reduction to which there is no sense at all in speaking about other possibilities.(Ramaeker 262)

Nietzsche's complaint isn't that individuals are molded into a shape, but that the shape

⁷ Though I chose to focus on Thelema for this essay I just as easily could have used just about any esoteric movement, from Scientology to Jewish Kabbalah, as a point of comparison as most of these movements can be aptly described as neo-Platonic. For anyone unfamiliar with the history of philosophy, the argument I'm contributing to is an ancient one—the idealism of Plato versus the materialism of Aristotle.

often becomes fossilized (261). For Nietzsche, cultural embedding does not bury the self. Rather, it is the breakaway from cultural obedience that truly makes a person individual. But this overcoming, the realization that the values and norms of one's culture are largely arbitrary, cannot take place if there isn't something to overcome.

The singular fact remains...that everything of the nature of freedom, elegance, boldness, dance, and masterly certainty, which exists or has existed, whether it be in thought itself, or in administration, or in speaking and persuading, in art just as in conduct, has only developed by means of the tyranny of such arbitrary law; and in all seriousness, it is not at all improbable that precisely this is 'nature' and 'natural'—and not *laissezaller*. (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil sec. 188)

The above “subordination to the rules of a system...should not be understood as a deplorable restriction of an individual's possibilities and freedom; on the contrary...[o]nly from within an arbitrary framework can freedom itself be interpreted as freedom”(Ramaeker 257).

In Nietzsche's parlance, the narrowing of one's perspective via cultural embedding is a form of lying. Lying in the sense that, though a cultural norm may be true and feel right in a personal and subjective way, it is not objectively or universally true. He accepted, grudgingly, that some amount of lying was necessary if not crucial for an individual not only to function but to exist. For instance, in “The Use and Abuse of History in Life” he recommends “the art and power to forget and to enclose oneself in a limited horizon,” as an aid for the individual unable to draw strength from the past. If our past interferes with our ability to act decisively and creatively in the present then we must jettison our baggage. Knowing our history isn't always as important as knowing when to discard it.

There's something I want to be perfectly clear about, however. So clear that I'm going to put an aside that would make more sense in a footnote in the body of the paper. Nietzsche

may have accepted that some people needed to distance themselves from their past, perhaps even lie about it to themselves, but it wasn't something he applauded. For him an individual's strength could be directly measured by just how much of the truth they could take (Ecce Homo Foreward Sec. 3).

It is Nietzsche's attitude toward truth that is perhaps his most original argument against an essentialist view of the self. The idea of a true self—whether one conceives of it as originating from divine mandate; cosmic order; the formative years of infancy; as static or dynamic—is to fall into the trap philosophy often wallows in: the quest for truth divorced from real world experience and application. To put it another way, Nietzsche asserts that truth is not always eternal, certainly not always accessible, and, contrary to the Enlightenment, not the same as factuality. He writes in Beyond Good and Evil, “The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment...The question is to what extent it is life preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species cultivating” (4)⁸. Whether one's thoughts and values do one's true-self justice is irrelevant.

“Truth” is... not something there, that might be found or discovered—but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end—introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining—not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. (Nietzsche, The Will to Power sec. 552)

This view denies the existence of an *a priori* self. It supposes an individual who not just in a never ending state of revision, but is capable, when necessary, of radical re-creation. A true self is, above all, an ultimate ontology, which in Nietzsche's view is another word for

⁸ A saying attributed to the Buddha formulates this a different way. “Any truth that cannot be spoken in love is no truth at all.”

self-deception⁹.

Some would no doubt turn this argument around on itself and say that the true self is a useful concept, regardless of its veracity, because what really matters is “to what point a lie is told” (Nietzsche, The Antichrist sec. 56). Indeed, Nietzsche wouldn't deny individuals the belief in the Thelemic Will or the Hindu Atman or the progressive true-self or the Christian immutable soul—they're not really that different—if those beliefs were beneficial for them as “what serves the higher type of man as nourishment or delectation must also be the poison for a very different and inferior type” (Beyond Good and Evil 30). What he wouldn't allow is the notion that what is “good for one is good for all” as such thinking tends to reduce what is good to “the mediocre standard of the herd” (Gemes, “Nietzsche's Critique of Truth” 55).

To aim for the fulfillment of the supposed true wishes of the self is to not only parade bondage as freedom, but to absolve one's self of responsibility for one's choices. There is no difference between defending an action as “God-given destiny” or saying “I had to do it—it was my True Will.” Both statements suggest that our worth is not in our actions, but in some predetermined essence (Gemes, “Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche” 341).

You Dare to Know Me?

After my vision and the revelation that to know myself was to know chaos, it took four more uneventful months of meditation before I accepted that there would be no more otherworldly experiences. It wasn't until I gave up on the Abramelin Operation and let my absurd expectations simmer down that I contemplated the vision I had had as a profound end rather than a prelude. My “angel” gave me the closest approximation of the thing called “I” that she could. To know one's self is to know a whirlwind of conflicting drives, instincts, fears,

⁹ Nietzsche's point doesn't seem to be that ultimate truth doesn't exist, but that the subjective nature of our consciousness would thwart our access to it.

hopes, dreams, memories, sensations, and garbage that is, as a whole, always just beyond our grasp.

Nietzsche held a somewhat similar view. He believed what we called self was really a storm of competing drives, all vying for control of the body. Our thoughts and actions are the voice of whichever of these drives happens to be dominant at that moment (Nehamas 400). The goal is to unify these drives so that they can work toward a common goal. To quote Nietzsche at length:

One thing is needful. To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that cannot be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime... In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste...Such spirits—and they may be of the first rank—are always out to interpret themselves and their environment as *free* nature—wild, arbitrary, fantastic, disorderly, astonishing; and they do well because only in this way do they please themselves. For one thing is needful: that a human being attain his satisfaction with himself—whether it be by this art or by that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to revenge himself therefor; we others will be his victims,

if only by always having to stand his ugly sight. (The Gay Science sec. 290)

The unification Nietzsche speaks of may very well be impossible—how could we know, for instance, that we hadn't merely fooled ourselves into thinking ourselves masters of our drives by ignoring evidence to the contrary—but that doesn't mean his ideas have no worth for us in the practical sense. Knowledge of the unconscious can give an individual valuable insight into her motives, actions, habits, and preferences. For this reason alone a period of reflection or meditation or contemplative prayer—which when stripped of its occult trappings is what the Abramelin Operation is—can be quite rewarding and useful. The information obtained from such a venture would allow the individual to be much more flexible in character, allowing her to, on occasion at least, break free from the tyranny of habit. In other words, to be more mindful.

This freedom is useless, however, unless it is utilized for a purpose:

“You call yourself free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you one of those who had the *right* to escape from a yoke? There are many who threw off their final worth when they threw off their servitude. Free from what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free *for* what?” (Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra 175)

Above all it must be remembered that the choice to pursue one particular perspective, and the motivation behind it, is another “lie” and not an ultimate truth. How could it be otherwise? Values are often conflated with morals, but moral choices are ethical dilemmas, e.g., when is violence justified? Values are the things we place value upon and thereby make life worth living in the first place—which often includes, but is not limited to, moral excellence. The high school graduate who chooses to go to a technical college, as opposed to a university

or directly into the workforce, is making a value-based decision. She's wagers that her experience there will prove more valuable—more in line with her wants and desires, her vision of who she could and would rather be—than the alternatives. Only the evidence of her past behavior and reactions—she liked shop class but hated accounting—can involve truth in the objective sense. The actual basis for the making the choice—her preference to enjoy her work, as opposed to making money faster in order to move out of her parents' sooner—is a subjective calculus of preference and taste.

Of course morals play a huge role in who we are, and that is one of the points where I break away from Nietzsche, but one need not be an atheist like him to take his ideas to heart¹⁰. I'm reminded of the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton: “Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny... We are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity” (56). Our beliefs should affect and limit our decisions, but the person who routinely transgresses their supposed convictions is not falling prey to their false self—they're exactly who they intend to be. Nietzsche's work, as paradoxical as it may seem, can be a powerful supplement to well known religious messages. Jesus and the Buddha both call upon their audiences to wake up and see the world for what it really is, and to consequently die to the forces that often make it that way—cultural, social, and familial expectations and power structures. Both men, in their own way, instruct us to be born anew, drawing our purpose and nourishment not from convention, but from a source far more radical and demanding. The value of teachers like Jesus and the Buddha is not in their support of conventional wisdom,

10 Though Nietzsche is often referred to as an atheist, the truth is more nuanced. Nietzsche never argued that God couldn't or didn't exist, but that the ability to believe in God had been undermined. Furthermore, he never attacks Christianity's truthfulness or lack thereof, but its ethics. His problem with Christianity wasn't that he found it unbelievable, but aesthetically displeasing. Whether his understanding of Christianity was accurate is another story. It's also important to note that in his polemic *The Antichrist*, though Nietzsche unleashes plenty of bile toward Christianity the religion, he is surprisingly respectful of Christ.

but precisely in their subversion of it.

Kierkegaard said we do not create the self, we chose it (260). In that same spirit Nietzsche invites us not to passively accept the wisdom of our culture, but to actively question it. He offers us no less than the chance to make a decision about who we will and won't be. To speak of the self in this manner is to speak of a perspective, along with all the narrowness the term implies. This perspective is formed in much the same way an author revises her work—through forces both conscious and unseen. “One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star” (Nietzsche, Thus Spoke). Chaos here doesn't mean disorder, but raw potential.

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[abramelin/abramelin.htm](#)>

Napping With My Daughter

She sleeps on my chest, her head cradled
in the hollow beneath my collarbone,
legs sprawled below my ribs, one hand against
my neck, the other arm flung wide. I rest
my hand on her back and recall my round,
pregnant belly, her unborn body curled
like a fern, her fists, small fronds
pressed against her cheeks. She is enough
to shorten my breath. I watch the minutes
on the bedside clock. I take shallow breaths
and listen for her breathing. She is the weight
above my heart. She is the labor in my lungs.



"Severed." Digital print shot with Fuji Finepix

"The image is meant to provoke an emotion about its state. Each one of us takes something different away from it... [T]hink of it as a reflection of the self. Almost like a modern Rorschach ink blot."

Sheldon Compton

Outsider, Outsider

I came up in eastern Kentucky with an interest in writing and all things literature and, as a result, developed a mean right hook. This land is jagged and to exist here means, artistic or not, one must become jagged, stone-like, no matter how sensitive to beauty and wonder. That sense of duality has never left me. I have worked at coal mines and hid my books under scoop beds, penned stories while pretending to write letters to girlfriends in math class. On the whole, I spent as much time disguising myself as I did developing myself as a writer.

And, over time, I realized how angry I should have been about this all along.

It wasn't a huge shift in my perspective. I simply stopped apologizing for my views, my interests, and continued doing what I'd always done.

Well, almost what I'd always done.

In the fall of 2004, I helped start *Cellar Door Magazine* with another local writer who was also what folks in our area would call an outsider, someone not from the mountains. Those from the mountains were insiders and those from away were outsiders. But we were here and not from here. Outsider, outsiders, if you will. We started *Cellar Door* with a great deal of fervor and energy. I wouldn't say that lashing out was what we had in mind, but we certainly were not interested in adding to the already overstuffed body of nostalgic Appalachian material already out there. That magazine pissed a lot of people off and that right good. Again, not our intention. I had stopped apologizing and that was that.

The magazine was hardly more than a jump from the cliff and roaring fuck you to everyone who wanted stories and poetry about people churning butter on the front porch and playing happily in creek beds and the coal camps, the glorious, shitty coal camps. The real situation has always been, and continues to be, the fact that I am an outsider in my own land. I connect to nothing. All things remind me of nothing. Occasionally I start conversations about literature or art or philosophy in places where these topics are viewed with more than disdain. These things conjure bile from the simple stomachs of truck drivers and mechanics at Dale Dorley's Diesel Solutions more quickly than anything else. I am the bile raiser, Raiser of Bile. Behold.

I have scars.

Poor pitiful me, you say? Probably not. Why not leave? Why not get out? Here's why –this is my land. Let me say that again. This. Is. My. Land. These mountains, these people, these horrible fucking people are the bricks and mortar of my work. I must be here. It's the rock and the hard place. My work as a writer has turned a corner that seeks to find humanity in that which is my region. Because, let's face it, the guy at Dorley's has hopes and dreams, too. Just because he hides them away doesn't mean they are not there. It is the duty of all writers in my region to give voice to these hopes and dreams, no matter what they may be. If I were to leave, to take my few talents elsewhere, this would be the penultimate sort of abandonment. That's on a human level. On a literary level, I can no more run away from my regional roots than I can change by place of birth or place of development as a person. This land is jagged and I am jagged for having been in it for so long.

More than four years after founding *Cellar Door* we continue to sift through submissions. Wrinkled manilla envelopes stuffed with hope into mail boxes across most of the fifty states and not a few countries. Our act of defiance, I believe, was recognized by those people,

those hundreds of outsiders from Montana to Beijing. They wonder through their day in their shitty places starting conversations that raise eyebrows and then trudge back home to write their stories about their people. They are the disconnected recorders of those who are plugged in but unaware. They are scratching for a fight while trying to explain why the fight must be endured at all. They are my people, too. And the truth is, sometimes late at night, I wonder if I haven't let them down. Cellar Door Magazine and all publications of such reaction are liberty bells ringing in an underwater world of acceptance and lost hope. Have I cracked that bell and stored it away for good?

The plain fact is that an outsider's work is never done. And no matter how much work has been offered, the fight is still there. Right hook, upper cut, jab, jab, but the round is never finished. Those who tire of this task must continue. This past winter, another magazine was launched. The *Wrong Tree Review* has just now started to flex its new wings and gain strength, and for that I'm happy. But the trial has only now started. There is more to be done, always more. That ringing bell of clarity to speak and write about that which is right in front of you but left unspoken never loses importance. The goal, the obligation, is to harness that incredible and wild energy and send it back to your people, hoping always that some small truth strikes so strongly a chord in their gut that it cannot be ignored. Hoping that you have given the world something real and clear and vibrant. Hoping you have given something that seems new but was there all along, waiting to be discovered. This is what the scars are for, the self-inflicted jaggedness, all the effort to dig in and stick. They're scars I'm proud of and there will be more. I'm ready.

“Pardon Our Dust”

Believe me, this setting and all those attached to it (including all those not related, not even cousins) are balanced on templates that exude going-on like a sweet-scented ambiance filling all rooms of itself so that you believe instantly there’s a future attendant

and waiting patiently as a shoreline behind one of the regular doors, ready to sweep out and surprise you with furtherance or at least incremental blessings. But trust me. That is and is not the way that it is, and I urge you to dare look under the plane of known objects—that floor of beloved and practical things,

gold rings and gear wheels alike. —Yes: while this is dangerous, it’s also required at some deeper-in as the only avenue to the deeper-out, and (if hidden base-level things matter at all) is the next step that you or that any someone *must* take, or forfeit forever: so do take it now. And in taking it:

you will notice at once, the something: lying beneath the sweet ambiance: a miasma, the ur-fog, expecting you like a child waiting the return of a central figure. And sure, all the pilings, all angry, will collapse now, and leave around you a chaos to sort through. But listen: this is the only place left you can find it: that singular Ranger Rick compass of so long ago.

THE HIDDEN DOOR

Arriving at Nazareth in the dark,
a college we've never seen, it was raining

as I scanned the campus

tracked a woman in a blue slicker

who pointed us
in the right direction before disappearing

in the rain.

*

Following signs to Smyth Hall,

I opened the door,
took the umbrella, shook it, then

opened a second door, kissed you

wished you luck as you hurried to the exam

behind a third.

*

In a tiny lobby with two chairs in adjacent corners,

I picked the green one

and sat facing a slumbering sky.

Reading poems,
thirty minutes passed as the clouds parted,

as the sun began to rise.

Staring out both sets of beautiful wooden doors,

I noticed
how the stained-glass of the outer door began

to reflect light

through dozens of tiny squares catching the tint
before it was lost.

*

Looking up, I saw a wave in the woodwork splash
along the ceiling, revolve
around the room.

This is a church, I said.
Delighted, I ran my hand along the brass railing, paced

the room reading college trivia

when a color wheel entered the room.

Suddenly,
filled with knowledge for what this time was for,

I touched the light in half-stride,

revealed a hidden door into a church for one.

*

Taking out my pen,
I'm sorry Mr. Merwin, but I needed paper

and it was snowing and the bench outside
blazed in hope as my kaleidoscopic eyelash

believed everything it saw,
the world expanding to absorb the light rising

on the tips of snow-brushed trees.

*

Turning my hand
over to receive something

it startled me

to see a berry-shaped glow on my palm.

A raspberry,
I say, hearing my wife's voice from nights before

say, Honey it's the size of a raspberry,

my joy, exploding through my body,

shaking me.

*

Writing on the leaves of raspberry cane, I find

the boy who disappeared in snow

has returned from a field where the sun was endless

in the land
that is no longer the land but a seed between my teeth,

a memory in fingernails.

My whole life—

How long
I shivered wondering if the storm within me

would ever allow me to touch a reflection

of my blood. This love I have to give, child—
only you,
only you could find me here, end winter,

tether me down from the flight of wandering,

from wishing I were a bird.

Artist Biographies

Sheldon Lee Compton lives in Kentucky. His work has appeared in *New Southerner*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, >kill author, *Full of Crow*, and elsewhere.

Jarrid Deaton lives and writes in Eastern Kentucky. He received his MFA in Writing from Spalding University. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Thieves Jargon*, *Pear Noir!*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, *decomp*, and elsewhere.

Sameha Farag lives in Southern California. Occasionally, she writes.

Cameron Fry attends the University of Texas at Austin. He's majoring in Television-Radio-Film, and would like to direct movies once he has completed his degree. He is an avid rugby player, and never turns down a good time. He'll take a night on the town over an evening in any day. Cameron finds writing to be an easy way to express his opinions without forcing them on people. Basically, Cameron is just a guy who wants to leave the world a little better off than it was when he came into it. Cameron is the son of Rod and Mary Fry; he two older brothers, Rod Jr. and Sean, and one older sister, Erin. He currently resides in Jay, Maine when he's not in school.

Kilean Kennedy grew up in Kentucky and now lives in the distant northeast close to a place called Boston. His stories have appeared/are forthcoming in *Barrelhouse*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Mississippi Review Online*, *Hobart* (web), *The Wrong Tree Review*, and *Word Riot*.

Susane M Lackovic (Andracki), was born into a military family in Fort Polk Louisiana. Her love of art and the fantastic grew from the different ideologies and folk lore of the many places she lived growing up, giving her a unique perspective on the world and the human condition. Her works of art evolve along with her showing her biography of thought and process. Susane currently resides in the glooming of Erie, Pa with her family and strives to teach the next generation the importance of the arts and experience.

Jason Lee Miller first discovered he existed in the Appalachian foothills of northeastern Kentucky about three decades ago, give or take, if you're inclined to believe time isn't just a figment of our collective imaginations. He discovered he could exist elsewhere just as well—even if elsewhere wasn't as aesthetically pleasant—whether in Lexington at the University of Kentucky or even in Japan, where he existed for about a year as an English teacher. His existence as an MFA student at Spalding University in Louisville was only partial, more out of mind than out of body, the culmination of his scholarship due the exact moment his daughter Cerridwyn was born. Cerridwyn, Jason, his wife Jenny, and his stepson Alex still currently and somewhat unwillingly exist in Lexington, where the gravitational pull is stronger than one might expect. Though previously existing as a Web journalist, Jason will transmogrify into a

composition instructor this August at Eastern Kentucky University. In general, he thinks "a short bio" is a silly concept.

Jae Newman lives in Batavia, New York, with his wife and daughter. He teaches writing courses at Jamestown Community College and works part-time at a grocery store. He earned an MFA in Writing from Spalding University in 2006. His work has appeared in many publications including, *Redivider*, *The Bellingham Review*, and *Korean Quarterly*. In 2008, his poem "Honeymoons" was published in *Karamu* and later nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Chelsea Pruckner is a self-proclaimed optimist who finished her first year of college this past May. Freshman year began at Grove city for this Erie native and ended at Penn State Behrend. She is majoring in biology and plans to become a physician's assistant.

David Tipton is Assistant Library Director at Spalding University, in Louisville, Kentucky. A recent graduate of the MFA in Writing program at Spalding, he has had work published in several web and print places, e.g., *Recursive Angel*, *Sidereality*, *Black Buzzard Review*, *The Heartland Review*, and *The Louisville Review*. Much of his current work in poetry is of the format 4x4—four stanzas of four unrhymed lines each, allowing for a sort of free verse freedom within the discipline of a formal container. Long line length, also, is an evolved characteristic in recent years, and both represents and provides for the mode of the exploratory, which is representative more of question than fact, statement, or "answer." In all, the current form of work seems to him best for achieving the music of words and the possible insights they may gather that suggest some definition of the beings we are, both in and outside of time.

Dennis Waddell is a 30 year old Louisville area artist with a bachelors degree in art from Eastern Kentucky University. He has had art on display in several areas across Kentucky, most recently at Mado on Frankfort Avenue in Louisville, and has shown through local artists' groups like Art Sanctuary and the Greenhouse Art Project. If you are interested in his art you may visit him at myspace.com/zuriel_art or email him at revzuriel@hotmail.com.

Amy Watkins grew up with the alligators and armadillos in the Central Florida scrub, the oldest child of a nurse and a carpenter. As a kid, she wanted to be an artist, a doctor, a teacher and a contestant on Star Search; she became a writer instead. Her poems have recently appeared in *Bayou Magazine*, *Conclave*, *The Louisville Review* and *Spinsters' Ink's* anthology of writing about menstruation, *Women. Period.* She lives in Orlando with her husband and only child, Alice.